

Gerd - Witcher from the School of the Bear

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Gerd - Witcher from the School of the Bear

by [GerdWitcher](#)

Summary

The story of the famous witcher from the School of the Bear, Gerd, and his journey on the path. It begins in 1214, as Gerd is roaming the continent in the middle of Imbolc. Taking a few contracts in Kaedwen on his way south, to Ban Glean, but soon a certain incident occurs in a village near Spalla, and a contract is issued.

Act or React

Gerd - Witcher from the School of the Bear

A story based on the world of The Witcher, created by Andrzej Sapkowski.

.I. Act or React.

It was a time of change, uncertainty, a time in which a few riots and rebellions burst on the continent. People hated the leaders, city councils and most than others, kings. As some of them were giving a shit about their kingdom and its people, or at least being a good, wise king.

No. They were bold, tired of the same borders, clinching to the past, when a powerful kingdom was one that conquered all the lands next to it. With war on their mind, that's what these times were. A few kingdoms and empires were still led by wise kings, like the north. Temeria and Redania were at good terms, living in peace for some decades now. Besides all the politics, there were still the monsters, the corpse eaters, beyond the city walls. Amongst the woods they hunt and devour the poor souls that dare walk into these vile creatures territories, they end up being the supper for a drowner or a ghoul. Worse case if you stumble upon an even more dangerous kind of beast, the big ones, trolls, fiends, griffins, cockatrices, dangerous beasts. Though they live in remote areas of places alike forests, hills, caves or plains, some of them from time to time move, for example to mate. That is sometimes the period when folk working on the lands get snatched by a griffin, eager to get the poor skinny human to it's nest. Most of the times, the villagers hire the wrong people to take care of such predator, thinking that a rat exterminator can take out a griffin, and if he fails, then, maybe a soldier can get the job done.

Usually, they only make it worse, instead of looking for someone who can deal with the problem. A professional. A witcher.

The locals of a village once tried to run off a pack of wolves, and it worked. Later they had a problem with four trolls that took a mine for themselves, killed the workers and probably ate them. Four days later, about a dozen peasants, armed with knives and wooden 'sticks', went to the mine thinking that they will chase away the trolls as well, since it worked with a pack of wolves.

Only two managed to get out. As the trolls threw a big boulder toward the entrance and those on its way got squashed pretty nicely. Those who didn't manage to get inside yet, ran back to the village, cursing and screaming, and told everyone what happened, and later they asked for proper help. A witcher's help, to get rid of the trolls in the caves.

Several days later, after the notice was put up on the notice board outside the local inn, a witcher showed up. Tall, chestnut-brown colored hair, with a thick beard, carrying on his

horse the head of a werewolf as a trophy, two swords on his back and a crossbow next to them, with a bear medallion hanging from his neck and a thick voice.

Asking at Petra's Inn about the notice regarding the troll problem. The innkeeper told him to talk with Hilgard, for it was him who put up the notice.

The village was a modest one. A few huts here and there and in between all the huts there was Petra's Inn, small, almost looking like a hut, a bit taller and with additional rooms.

It had outside, near the entrance four tables. At one of them sat two well intoxicated men, barely standing straight on the benches. One resting his head on the table while from time to time got up only to take another sip of ale from his tankard, and the other across the table, leaning left and right, with his hand raised above the table, holding his tankard, murmuring something.

As but a couple of steps behind them, next to the door, was Petra's daughter, Chemile, cleaning the unoccupied tables. She was a beautiful lass, fair haired with blue eyes, supple waist, with two beautiful, generous sized breasts and long well shaped legs. Wearing a knees long, blue dress, with white details around her chest and arms. She was helping her mother with the Inn, and dreamed to go to Oxenfurt or even Aretuza, to study magic, science, medicine and literature.

The village had a big oak at its northern side, shadowing a good portion of the village from the hot sun in the summer. From the southwest entrance of the village you would notice spread around, in the front of the peasant homes, roses, red and white, tulips of different colors and obviously, dandelions. Wives were tending to the house, washing clothes, feeding their child, cooking, crocheting. Old men sitting on a wooden bench in front of their hut, smoking from their pipe, puffing smoke like a Novigrad chimney. While the ones younger and still able, were working the land, building, some went or returned from hunting boar, hare or deer. Further, little boys playing with sticks pretending to be swords and shields made from the caps of a barrel, girls that played near the colorful roses and tulips, picking dandelions to make a beautiful crown. Older girls, women, around the age of marriage, fooling around with their beloved in the nearest barn or haystack. And those that had no half, helped around the house.

As by Petra's directions, the witcher promptly left the inn, and headed straight towards Hilgard's hut. Which sat at the edge of the village, next to the tall old oak. The hut itself was surrounded by a wooden fence. Beyond it, a front yard in which Hilgard's daughter was tending to the few roses she had planted last spring and next to her a wooden basket filled with wet clothes that had to be dried. A couple of steps to the left was her father Hilgard. A widower, for 3 years now, he was building an additional shed, to put this year's crops.

'Hilgard ?', asked the witcher, after clearing his throat.

'That's me.', answered the villager. 'Who're you ?', inquired the peasant, looking up at the witcher's face with a hand above his eyes.

Hilgard's daughter was most curious about what the tall, bearded traveler, who was carrying two swords on his back, wanted with her father. So, as she put some clothes to dry on a line

that was held near the hut, she did not take her eyes away from them, eavesdropping on what the strange man had to discuss with her dear father.

'Gerd, witcher.', said the man while looking around.

'Hmm...'. Hilgard seemed slightly surprised, as he then placed the hammer he held in his right hand, and a handful of nails down on the improvised worktable next to him. 'Here 'bout the notice, aren't you ? Didn't expect such a fast response, well t'was time some of your kind came to these lands. We got plenty of work for you.', said the villager scratching his nose. 'About a fortnight ago, one of those damned flying lizards was spotted a couple miles north of here, shrieking as it was soaring over the woods near the main road. There's bound to be a notice about that too, if you're to head that way. You're a tall one, haven't seen a man this tall...Hmm...Live and see, I guess. Now, 'bout the notice...'. He paused, turned around towards a table, grabbed a mug and drank, he puffed with relief, and then resumed. 'it was those damn trolls...that took the mine near the village. Killed some of our people when they tried to get them out of there. The two lads that managed to get out, said that one of them threw a fuckin' giant rock that mangled the rest...The two did say the damned things murdered all the miners inside too. And that they hanged the remains of their bodies on the walls alike- pork loins waiting to be smoked.', Hilgard uttered, then took another drink from his mug while looking towards the Inn, puffed, then proceeded to continue. 'Will you be able to aid us master ? And rid us of this blight ?'.

'I will. But first, let's talk about the reward. How much ?', asked the witcher.

'Well...', Hilgard answered scratching the back of his head. 'The whole village chipped in, with what they could...This' hundred and twenty crowns not enough ? We've sent a handful of lads to the villages nearby. To ask about how much would a witcher demand for such a contract-'.

'It's enough.', interrupted the witcher. 'It'll do. Where's the cave ?', he continued.

'T'his east of the village. If you take this road until you get to the crossroads, then head left, towards the hill, you'll get to the mine in no time.', said Hilgard.

'So long, then.', said the witcher as with a nod, he left the yard in front of Hilgard's hut. And headed back towards the Inn, where he left his mare, and from where he would make haste towards the cave the trolls dwelled within, as it was getting close to dusk.

Unlike the other witchers from his guild or another, he didn't use to ask much about his contract. He only wanted the simplest version of what, who, when, where and how. The rest he would figure out himself. He, most of the times watched the creature, learning it's certain qualities, as he liked to test several theories about the beasts he hunted. A weird curiosity of his. Depending on its kind, how the beast behaved while searching for food and the way they kill. For some stalk their food, some ambush it, other just chase it to exhaustion and then give the final blow. That sometimes different species had similarities only because they roam the same forest. However, some had differences, he claimed that some of them develop certain unique qualities during their lifetime. A theory backed by certain witcher books and tomes. A change influenced by certain factors as climate, location and what they eat. So he liked to

stalk his 'prey', observe, then if he was satisfied, he would slay the beast. He would often do the same with humans. He used to say that patience is a virtue, but sometimes he would just go and kill the damn thing. Let's say he had both patience and impatience, and choose often the last, depending on his mood.

Gerd was coming into the village of Guryuh from the pass through the Blue Mountains near Ban Aard, heading towards Redania with destination Skellige. He was five weeks ago in Zerrikania, he spent almost a year there, for he had a contract on a mercenary called Galodo Frock. Usually witchers from the school of the Bear don't have much interest in bounty hunting, but Gerd made an exception for this one, due to a handful of reasons, one of them being the sheer amount of ducats offered as reward. All for a mercenary who with his crew, butchered a whole village east of Spalla.

This witcher was on the path for long time. Last time he went to Ard Skellig was around two years ago. He had good contracts on both monsters and humans, and for this contract, he had a good reason to accept, for this man Galodo Frock, deserved to die.

Three weeks after the massacre, he arrived and took the contract, from the Guards Post in Spalla. He then went towards the Blue Mountains along Yaruga's shore to the camp of this Galodo Frock. About whom folk said was a skilled sword fighter. They also heard that he came from the northern lands of Kovir.

It was winter, Imbolc. Thus, when Gerd left Spalla a thick blanket of snow already covered the lands. He wore a typical kind of heavy armor, known as Ursine Armor, so he was well protected against enemies and the weather. On his way to the mercenary's camp he stopped to feed his horse and himself, while a pack of clouds was approaching from the west. When he resumed his hunt, it started to snow, and when he got near the camp it was snowing so hard he barely noticed it. That was good, for his thick armor and the bear pelt on his back kept him warm from the cold, but the mercenaries were to endure the blizzard. He then looked for a place to leave his horse and found a cave, where he made a fire and left some hay for the horse, then went to Galodo's camp.

He made his way into the camp by setting aflame the tents around an old watchtower. The men jumped and ran out, some in flames others not, but confused and battered by the strong wind and some without a weapon. They barely stood a chance against Gerd who cut their neck, one by one with his steel sword.

Later, after he took care of the mercenaries he set aflame, he found an entrance to the tower. Where on the second floor he met more of Galodo's men, but, not Galodo. Thus, he cut through his men and left one alive to question about Galodo's whereabouts. This man said he went towards a village up Yaruga's shore and took four of his men to get a shipment from Zerrikania.

After that, the witcher planned to go and find his target, but when he got out the door of the tower, Galodo and a couple of his mercenaries were looking for who or what caused the fire and killed his men. Gerd walked calmly down the stairs of the tower and then casted a spell of Aard that knocked to the ground Galodo and his pals. Galodo, without knowing what had just happened quickly got up and ran, ordered his man to 'Cut the bastard down'. And as he

got near his horse gave another order, 'After, meet me in Jorg', then got on his horse and ran towards the pass.

Galodo's men surrounded the witcher. Being too confident of themselves, one behind, one on his left, another on the right and one to the front. The witcher calmly drawn his sword, as he sat straight with his sword pointing to the ground, waiting for one of those fools to act. He had not waited long, for the one behind charged towards him, holding his sword with his both hands, as the one in front of him followed after, while the other two remained on their positions.

The witcher moved aside and with his sword cut the one behind in two and stopped the other's dull blade with his gauntlet, then, with a flick of his right hand he threw him on his back with his Aard spell. After which he stabbed him into the torso. The other two seemed frozen like, one looked at the witcher and dropped his sword and puked, the other got his guard up, to which the witcher responded with a smooth smile and a quick spin and a slash that beheaded the man. The other fell on his bottom and crawled away from the witcher while looking at his face covered in blood, which the witcher later cleaned with a piece of cloth he had on his belt, and walked towards the fleeing boy. Scared shitless of Gerd, he kept crawling. The boy seemed young, green to all this, the gore he'd just witnessed was too much for his faint heart, but the witcher had no mercy for these kind of men. So he got closer and closer to him, close enough at one point, that the boy reached desperately for the knife in his boot and threw it towards the witcher. He did only try for he missed. And at that point in his mind, if before there was a bit of hope that the monster slayer may let him live. Now that hope was dead, and he could only think that he will die as well in a few moments, as the witcher got closer with each second. It seemed his steps grew longer in length, but, slower. He was watching the boy, observing him on his last moments in the world of the living.

The boy stopped, looked at the witcher's tedious face as he stepped closer to him, his eyes went down to his feet then up again staring into the witcher's cat like eyes, glowing in the dark, and with a trembling voice barely whispered. 'Please, I be-beg you, I- I don't wanna die, I- will leave and never return- Plea-Please, mas-master. I'll- I'll tell you everything you want-', then suddenly stopped. As then, he raised his hand above his closed clinching eyes, while slowly turning his head away, being sure that the witcher will deliver the killing blow. He remained like that for a few moments, all the while, he must've been questioning himself why he wasn't dead yet. Therefore, with a trembling gulp of air, suspecting that the witcher wished to know what he knows, he lowered his hand. Only to see the witcher thrust the blade of his sword into his belly. Followed by the blood, which slightly started to flow beneath his gambeson, and underneath him, spreading on across the snow, which soon turned red.

'You know...', began Gerd. 'Even though it's quite painful. This, is the slowest way. You just bleed until you faint and then, die. So, we have time to see what you know...'

He then grabbed the boy by his leg and dragged him towards the tower, leaving a trail of red on the white snow. Sat him on the stairs, while he took a chair and placed it in front of the boy, and sat on it.

'Well, what do you know ?', Gerd asked with a sniff.

'He went to- Jorg, he has more men there, but- I- doubt he'll return-', the boy replied, with a couple of grunts.

'I heard him before he left...'. Gerd interrupted. 'What's in Jorg ?'.

'H-He has a hut- there. His wife-'.

'Huh'. interrupted Gerd once again, with a subtle smirk on his face. 'Go figure. That ought to be enough. Thanks, have a nice one.'.

As the witcher walked away from the dying boy, seated on the wooden stairs, and whose blood began to glide down the stairs, turning the snow red as it touched the ground.

'Here...', said the witcher, grabbing the knife the dying boy threw at him, throwing it back. The knife stopped in the wooden stair, next to his right hand. 'In case you need it later.'.

The boy could only watch as the witcher left him and the others, dead and burned, along with the still burning tents in the camp. Around the lone old watchtower.

As the witcher returned to the cave, took his mare, and headed towards Jorg, where his target Galodo Frock, fled...

Thrill of the Hunt

.II. Thrill of the Hunt.

'He's a witcher, of course he could slay the trolls.', said a villager.

'Still what did he do so special that he killed the damn rock fuckers...!', uttered another villager, seated at the same table.

'Hmm...!', murmured the first villager to speak. 'Why don't you ask him ?', he added.

'Nah.', the other villager scoffed. 'Doesn't feel that important, rather finish my beer.'.

The villager chuckled. 'Well said !', then both drank from their tankards.

It was midday, Gerd had finished his contract, and got his reward. Set to buy the necessary supplies for his journey back home, to the Skellige Isles. After his long time on the path, he was eager to get back at the fortress of the school of the bear on Ard Skellig.

And a few hours later he resumed his journey, leaving the village of Guryuh.

After a few miles he stopped near some woods, two and a half miles from the shores of the Pontar. Where he made a fire and gave his horse some hay and water.

Since his departure from the village, a couple of black clouds gathered from southwest. Though besides the wind and a few drops of water, it seemed that the storm tired out before it reached those hills on this shore of the Pontar.

While the witcher ate, he remembered a few more things that took place during his journey to Zerrikania. Especially when he travelled to the village called Jorg, where Galodo Frock fled.

During the time he fought Galodo's men, the snow storm seemed to take a turn north and calmed down, so the witcher found Galodo's horse tracks and followed them to the village of Jorg. Where he thought he would find Galodo and end the contract, few thoughts he had that Galodo Frock would take him through Zerrikania's hot plains of dust and sand. He just had no idea.

At this point, Gerd was near the village of Jorg, it took more than he thought to reach the village, it was almost dawn.

When he arrived, he was awaited at the Jorg's gate by Galodo's gang, which it seemed the witcher had to defeat.

'You !', screamed one of the men. 'We've been waiting for you. Now, it is time that you pay !'.

'Let's kill him !', shouted another, running toward the witcher.

'Alright. Bring me his head !', spoke a man that walked back a few steps and watched as the rest charged towards Gerd.

The witcher used his crossbow and shot the one who charged first in the leg, drew his sword and cut the head of the man. Afterwards, he waited until the others came closer and casted a sign of wind that pushed them a couple of meters away. Then he ran towards them swinging his steel sword and cutting through those that fell down or got stunned by the spell. While the others either fled to the village in fear or stayed to face the witcher.

Those who remained were many in numbers. Gerd killed six or seven of them and around three stepped back for a while letting those confident enough to fight the monster slayer.

After a few looks at his foes the witcher took a bomb from his belt and threw it among those dumb enough to fight him, then casted the sign of Igni. The bomb which he thrown, contained a gas that was very flammable and blew up in a storm of fire, burning half of them. While the others stepped away from the witcher, four and a half in numbers, for one was a dwarf. As he began to get closer to Gerd, the bandit struck, soon after the others followed. The witcher deflected one sword and rolled forward and took on another, clashed his sword with all at least two times. He countered a bandit's strike, cutting through the steel plated armor above his right hip, deep enough that he may have sliced the poor's man liver. Causing an open wound which the witcher planned to exploit by also delivering a strong right punch to the injury caused by his blade. Then drove his sword through the bandit's chest. Soon after, the others had shared the same fate, all falling to the blade and the skilled swordsmanship of the witcher. At last, one remained, he was alone against the witcher, he was also sure that he may end like the others.

The battle was fierce for the mercenary, now left kneeling in front of the witcher. He was at his last powers, barely breathing, grasping for air, with his left hand bleeding from the strong strikes the witcher gave. That he managed to take on, and still survive.

The sun had risen several minutes ago, when he and few of his comrades were still standing. Now they were laying down and some gave their last breath, some in more pieces than before, while the witcher was still standing. Tireless. Ruthless, like no blade ever touched him. Positioned with his back towards the sun, the bandit could see only a black figure of death, which in the next moments will inevitably send him to his ultimate demise. To a painful and merciless death by the sword soaked in the blood of what, a few moments ago, were once his mates. Though at his end, with his last resources, he got up, with his head pointed down, eyes barely open, covered in dirt and dried blood. He raised from the ground, but then in a blink of his barely opened eyes he found himself shot in the left shoulder by the witcher, and fell down on his back. Watching the grim black figure of the witcher Gerd approaching. Walking towards him with his sword in his left hand, looking at the village.

Soon, Gerd was next to him. The witcher grabbed his sword with both hands, piercing the bandit's torso right where the heart was. Then he continued walking towards the village, where Gerd decided to find the one that ordered the men he killed to attack.

The village of Jorg, was located in a some sort of a canyon or a pass, with at least seven or eight families living in it. It was on Yaruga's northern shore, near its source. The entrance of the village was a wooden gate, beyond which you could see a tower. The village itself was a small one, with several small huts starting from the gate and an Inn at the center. Near which stood a quartermaster shop, selling from food to certain tools, even swords and armor. Then a big house and towards the other side, to the eastern gate a few more small peasant huts and then the eastern gate itself. All the villagers had a small garden near their hut, where they grew crops, they also were known to grow animals like pigs, sheep and cows. As said, a simple and small village, known before to mine for coal and iron in the region.

The Inn itself was owned by Galodo, but ran by his wife, Lona, and her brother, Jakko. Who, was the one that ordered Galodo's men to kill the witcher. He and his sister Lona, were twins, around twenty-six summers old.

Lona was a beautiful and smart woman, blonde hair and blue eyes, she was almost twenty years younger than her husband, Galodo. Who was in his late forties. Even so, they had two children. A boy and a girl, both around five, six years old. They lived in a big house near the Inn, with Lona's brother, Jakko, and their mother, Merena.

Jakko, was as his sister fair haired with blue eyes, with a scar on his left cheek and wore a small beard. As his father, he wasn't very tall, a few inches taller than a woman, but well build, with a wide back and bulky arms. He seemed to know how to handle himself.

However, when Gerd entered the village he could only find Jakko, trying to run as his brother in law did. But, due to the unfortunate meeting with the witcher he couldn't reach the same destination as Galodo, who sent his children and perhaps his wife and her mother away. And fled beyond the Blue Mountains.

The witcher found Jakko in the stables, preparing his horse...

'Funny, to find you still here...!', said Gerd near the stable door.

Jakko stood next to his horse with the harness in his hands, frozen like.

'What ? Thought that your men would've killed me by now ?', continued the witcher, while Jakko still didn't move a muscle. Stood still, like a wooden pole. 'Not much of a talker, are you ?', said Gerd as he walked closer to him. 'You must know something, don't you ? Care to share it with me ?', kept asking the witcher, now standing behind Jakko.

At that moment, Jakko in his mind saw an opportunity to escape the witcher. He threw the harness towards the witcher, and jumped on the back of his horse. But, Gerd used his Aard spell and knocked him off the horse.

'Huh. Good idea, but a dumb one.', said the witcher while walking slowly towards Jakko, who seemed to be injured by the fall. 'Now, are we gonna talk ? Or you have another dumb idea ?'.

Jakko seemed to be injured, though when Gerd got closer to him, he jumped at him with a hunting knife in his hand. Gerd grabbed him by the hand and broke his elbow, then, as he fell

on his knees Gerd kicked him in the chest slamming him against the stable wall.

Jakko, had his hand broken and at least a few ribs from the kick Gerd delivered him. And he was also breathing heavily, coughing and grasping for air, having a pierced lung as well.

'Look...', began Gerd. 'You're pretty dead now, barely breathing, broken ribs, and a pierced lung...', paused the witcher while looking at Jakko who 'rested' with his back on the wall and face pointing down while barely breathing, holding his visibly broken arm.

'Tell me where he went ?', asked the witcher. Noticing that no answer came from the man, he made a sign, *Axii*, and asked again. 'Tell me where he went ?', and then the man began to speak.

'He went- past the mountains. Heading towards the desert-'

Gerd, didn't even listen to what else Jakko had to say, as he heard that Galodo was once again ahead of him. Planning to cross the mountains east, towards the desert of Korath.

He quickly got on his horse and hurried towards the pass...

Blood, bones and drowners.

.III. Blood, bones and drowners.

As he was left with no choice, than to follow once again the trail of Galodo.

Gerd, got on his horse, leaving Jakko, in the empty village of Jorg, as he set to track and kill the mercenary.

But as he was on Galodo's trail, witcher Gerd remembered about a contract that he had not long ago. This one happened last Yule, on the Arc Coast of Redania:

Memories:

Gerd was passing by a city, and thought that having more coin wouldn't hurt. Thus, he took a contract, which was about three men that disappeared in the sewer. Issued by a concerned citizen, a cook, Marco. After he and the cook discussed details, and settled on the reward. The witcher went inside the sewer to investigate. However, when he got out of the sewers, he was approached by two guards, who promptly invited him to join the wealthiest man in the city at his house for a supposed job proposal. Not something Gerd would refuse or could in the given situation, as the two guards didn't seem to take no for an answer.

'Beautiful as far as beasts go, don't you think?', said the noble as he proudly presented his collection of hunting trophies. As among them was being showcased, the head of a young basilisk. The other individual did not answer back, nor did show any intention to.

'Hmm.', the noble murmured. 'Nevertheless, come this way. I might have something that will sure catch your eye.', said the gentleman, while the uninterested character nodded then proceeded to join the host.

On the way to whatever place the red-bearded noble and his guest were heading towards. 'I hear you have some business to take care of in the city.', the noble began, expecting his guest to chime in. Yet, contrary to the noble's expectation, the guest didn't. 'May I propose a bit of advice?', the noble continued, while the guest seemed bored, if not speechless, as even the host might've begun to question whether his guest was deaf as well. As he just set his eyes on the noble for a few moments than back ahead. Without any word from the strange fellow, the noble-man cleared his throat and resumed to his advice.

'This is a peaceful city. There is no need to carry swords inside the city, and I mean no offence to you. But, those swords of yours are scaring the populace within the city walls. If I may...', the noble paused trying to read his guest, but to no avail. As the noble believed he would have more success reading corpses. 'Could you leave them here? Under the locked key. A key that I will give to you, and only to you...', the business-man paused a bit as he looked at his guest, who probably gave a literal shit about whatever he was babbling about, perhaps this certain individual was not even paying attention.

They then came out of a stair case, past the doorway into a great chamber. Certainly used by the noble for the fanciest of parties, perhaps orgies as well. As both advanced towards the furthest side of the chamber. The guest led by the host, stopped on the balcony that had a view across the whole city. From there you could see the port, which had its always busy sight, so that you could hear the sailors and dock workers as they were loading an unloading the ships. You'd also see the tall buildings around the market that stretched all the way to the bay, and the famous city walls that go around, towards the port, where they would scale down in height until they are level with the sea. Creating an artificial bay, were merchant ships and not only, from across Redania, Kovir, Nilfgaard, Cintra and Skillige, were anchored in the famous Baltazar Bay of Eskvon, a city north of Blaviken, on the Arc Coast of Redania.

After a few moments of silence after both the host and his guest stepped on the balcony, the noble attempted to add further clarification to his proposal. 'I assure you no one will-'

'I won't.', said the guest, and walked a couple of steps away from the host, going near the balcony's balustrade, placing his left hand on it, looking towards the bay.

'But-', said the host before being interrupted by his impolite guest.

'I have a contract in the city. And I cannot apply my trade without my swords. Therefore, I won't leave them here.', said the guest while applying a sober tone to his already thick voice.

'A contract inside the city?', the noble asked, almost scoffed. 'What kind of business could you have here? There aren't any-', the host was interrupted again by his witcher guest.

'Drowners in the sewers.', the witcher added.

'In the sewers?', the noble scoffed. 'How did they get into the sewers? There are steel grates at the exits. Do you have any proof which supports your words?'

'The stench and blood present on my armor should be enough, but if that isn't enough...How about the corpses I've left down there?', the witcher began, with a tone that the noble must've found rude, if not worthy of a good beating and a couple good days in the clink. 'And as far as how they got in there. Perhaps, a couple of bars were rusty, drowners chewed them off...'

'Those foul beasts, always on the prowl!', the noble replied with a thoughtful gaze. 'Have there been any victims?'

'I found the remains of two men. One around thirty years old and the other, late forties. But, three had been reported as being missing. So, the third one, is still in the sewers.', said the guest.

'But what in the name of...', paused the noble, while rising his left hand to rub his forehead. 'What were they doing there?'

'Couldn't ask them, but there may be others. Those three had been reported missing by a cook that prepares meals for the homeless. But, for the reason they were in the sewers, they probably sleep there...'

'Sleep ? In the sewers ? How could someone sleep there ?', inquired the noble, baffled that someone would choose living in such a place. Making Gerd suspect that he may be overreacting on purpose.

'Well, it is better then the streets, at least they have a roof to keep the cold away as well as the rain off their heads.', answered the witcher. Giving a cold stare to the noble. 'Surprising. How a man such as yourself isn't aware of that. Considering that these men, probably women and children too, are still citizens of this city...', continued Gerd while shifting his eyes away from the noble, looking again towards the bay.

'I don't take interest in vermin, witcher...', answered the noble slightly annoyed by the witcher's previous sentence, and with a smirk he resumed. 'Anyway...You shall not continue your investigation. There's no need.', the noble said calmly, approaching Gerd. 'Unless you have a death wish. And thus I have solved our problem. You, can stay in the city as long as you want. And there will be no need for your weapons anymore.', continued the noble man, quite happy about his resolve.

'You'll let innocent people die ? Because of their social position ?!', responded Gerd with a slightly, far fetched upset tone.

The noble scoffed. 'You don't fool me witcher. So, why are you trying to fool yourself ? You don't care about those men and women more than I do, nor do you care for their children. As you know that their born out of lousy seeds. This revered city doesn't need them nor will it raise a finger to help them. Further more, the world doesn't need them either. The sooner they expire the better. Besides, they have no such thing as a social position. They were not predestined to be poor. No, they had the same choices I had. But chose to be poor, to live off of other people's backs alike leeches. They, are worse than rats. Therefore, the more die, the better.', answered the noble, showing a slight smile followed by disgust. 'They are far from innocent too. They, my dear witcher, are those who steal, murder and destroy the image of this beautiful city. Thus, I won't mind, if-

'What if their problem becomes yours ?', interrupted the witcher.

'How so ?', the noble asked, clueless of how could such a thing even happen.

'You think the drowners will stay in the same place ? What if they get out on the streets ?'.

'Then...You will take care of them.', quickly answered the noble, pointing at Gerd. 'However, until then.', the noble resumed. Providing Gerd with the impression that he was weighing such a consequence to a counterweight similar in nature with unicorns and fairies. 'The beasts would've taken care of those worthless inhabitants in the sewers. And, when the time comes, you will end your contract and I will pay you good coin. I'll arrange that my men along with the guards, see that all entrances to the sewer around the city be nailed shut. So that no men nor drowner can get out or get in. As well as, make sure no other contract is posted. Problem solved.', continued the noble, while pouring himself a glass of wine. 'Wine, witcher ?'

'No thanks.', answered Gerd.

'Don't be irritated, my friend. I shall not let you leave the city without a good pouch of gold. For, what you just brought to my attention, is good information that has to be rewarded. Won't you agree ?', the noble said, then drank from his gold dressed cup, filled with aged wine. 'Of course you do. Easy coin, isn't it ?', said the noble while taking another sip from his wine.

The witcher still, unimpressed by the host, kept looking towards the bay.

'Come on, witcher. I just saved you from a whole day in the sewers. You, should be grateful, not judgmental towards me. I am your only friend here...', the host paused as he looked at his guest. 'I'd rather not cross swords with you, witcher. For I've heard rumors of how efficient you can be. Meaning you're more useful to me alive than dead.', the noble continued, then sighed. 'I will even pay you in advancement. How does eight-hundred and fifty crowns sound ?'. Seeing as his guest resorted back to being a mute, the host proceeded to elaborate. 'I tell you how they sound...Far better then what you would get from that contract of yours. What do you say to that deal ?', said the noble, placing his elbows on the balcony's balustrade.

'Huh.', muttered the witcher. 'You nobles, have a grim sense of humor.'

'Well, I am flattered that you noticed, but what-do-you-say ?' asked the noble once again, looking at Gerd.

'Deal...', Gerd murmured.

'Hah !', shouted the noble. 'I knew you'd see sense !'. he continued with joy, patting Gerd on the back and handing him a cup of wine as well , a Toussaint favorite, Erveluce. 'A toast to our collaboration. May it last long and bear the finest of fruit !', the noble continued.

Two peasants, gossiping while working the land near a village, south of Blaviken:

'Did you hear ?', asked a peasant another peasant.

'What is there to hear ?', answered the other peasant.

'A witcher's in town...A famous one at that.'

'And who is that ?', asked the other, straightening up and placing his hands on the hips, stretching his back.

'Vesemir of Kaer Morhen.'

'Hmm...Doesn't ring a bell.', responded the other scratching the temple of his head and grabbing his spud.

'You know...The one that came around here a few years ago, when we had that water hag at the river.'

'Nah...Don't remember.', responded the other.

'Whatever...'

It was probably the darkest night yet, this spring. One in which almost no stars could be seen on the dark, clouded sky as the moon was barely poking out on the edge of one black cloud. Slowly consuming the image of the moon on the night sky. Great flashes of light could be seen coming from the west. A storm was coming. Heading inland, with great fury. As the flashes of lighting were slashing the sky, and thunders shook the ground...

A flash cut through the thick darkness.

Then, a thunder shivered the plains, woods, hills and mountains.

It was once again, the season of storms.

Suddenly, the witcher Gerd opened his eyes, looking like he just woke up from a bad dream. As he drew his hand over his face, he saw, the giant flash of light tearing through the night sky, then heard the loud thunder. It was so loud that it spook his mare, which he calmed with the sign of Axii.

He then took his swords and jumped on his horse, heading towards Novigrad. Where he planned to find and take a ship, to the Skellige Isles.

'Down !', shouted one sailor. 'Get down !' he shouted once again. While all those around him, were holding tooth and nail to whatever they could, as the big waves were balancing the boat, with all the cargo set tumbling and stumbling across the lower deck of the ship. As did the men, as waves took them, from one side to another, from port to starboard, up and down, overboard, and so on. The thunderstorm was fierce, lighting was traveling the sky tireless, the thunders were so loud that even the seas trembled and shook. Heavens were lighting up all over. As fierce waves were hitting the bow of the ship and the sides, setting barrels and crates rolling and sliding on the upper-deck, some falling overboard. Then, there were the sails, which barely withstood the strong winds, that moved them in all the possible directions, shattering a few of them, as the captain of the ship was holding onto the wheel, soaked. Moved left and right around it, by the violent waves. Quickly blinking his eyes as he was constantly hit by the waves that smashed and broke on the sides of the ship, as he was steering it through the rising seas.

It was simply put, as one hell of a storm. Sailors were lost to the rabid sea. Some died drowned. Others squashed by the barrels and crates that broke free of their chains and ropes during that chaos and only a lucky handful of them managed to not get thrown overboard.

But one ship, of merchants and tailors from Cidaris got wrecked near the coast of Redania, a few miles from Oxenfurt, on the southern shore of the Pontar.

While the morning sun was rising once more upon the lands of Redania, Gerd was traveling at full gallop, towards the city of Novigrad...

As the witcher had followed Galodo's tracks for some time now, he noticed a second set of horse shoe tracks. Indicating that someone awaited him. The place where he noticed the tracks was ahead of a portion of road that was made of stone, so he couldn't find any foot prints, due to the rocky ground.

Both were heading southeast, only a couple of hours ahead of him...

The Great Sun

.IV. The Great Sun.

The deserts of Korath are a mischievous place to be...Just from afar you'll see the living, moving dunes of sand, that between all the heat haze create small islands like, floating in mid air. Floating, or if you allow it to slip into your mind, surrounded by water, but, it would do you more harm then good, for that is and illusion, a nasty one and of the deadly kind. If that doesn't kill you, the beasts beneath the sand will, its only a matter of time, either the monsters get you, or the thirst, neither one of them is pleasant. Further away through the haze you could spot rocky shapes, pointing south, those were the Sandstone Hills, or as other's call it Devil's Pit, filled with quicksands, deep underground galleries and abrupt valleys. Those who ventured that far into the desert, found nothing but death, sand, rock and sandstone, then, even more sand...

- Vigil of Valkar, 'Naturalis Alucinatio et Miraculorum Naturalium Scriptor', chapter III.

The witcher, followed the two sets of tracks of the mercenary and his companion. Gerd presumed, due he found a set of foot prints, that were too small for a male and too big for a child, also by the distance between each step. Found near a tree. Where it seemed the two stopped for a while, that the other rider, was a woman.

Gerd was close, they were now half an hour ahead of the witcher, it was midday, and as it seemed the two had no idea that they were followed. Confident that the witcher lost their track or that he was slew in Jorg, by Jakko's men.

The road they were now on was a narrow pass through the mountain, as Gerd predicted they were in no hurry. Slowly walking, toward the exit from the pass, which was close and in sight. At that moment the witcher kept following, he also thought to attack but he would hurt Galodo's female companion, using the sign Aard was a bad idea. It could result in a landslide, so he found following them, the most appealing idea in the current scenario. So he kept following, even after they got out of the pass.

It is afoot,

It really is...

A great deal of trouble is afoot...

...between, elves, dwarfs, humans, halflings and mutants.

We are all the same inside

We only differ on the outside,

*Some hate,
Some love,
Some don't even bother,
To call a being like...
...an elf,
a dwarf,
a witcher,
a doppler !
Their brother...
Why the hate ?
Why the trouble ?
Aren't we all made from the same type of rubble ?!
The pain that we cause...
Only,
Because, of our looks !?
This is time to wake up folks !
'Cause...
a great deal of trouble,
Is afoot.*

- Konstantin Wolwyen, 'Sumus !', Volume .I. Thirteen Century Poetry.

The last time Gerd was this south was at least five or six months ago, when he got together with an old friend in Nazair:

It was early in the morning, the sun wasn't even on the sky, but his beloved, the moon, was still shining through the blue draperies.

'Anyway...', she said with a calm voice. 'Will you winter here, with me ?'.

'Hmm, tempting...', he said, while she placed her right palm on his left cheek. Massaging it with her thumb, and her right leg around his hip, then slowly touching his chest with her lips.

'But...I cannot.', he continued.

'And why is that ?', she asked, while resting her head on his chest, and slowly turning it, pivoting her chin against his pectoralis major, staring her bed companion in the eyes.

'I won't stay this year.', he said, 'I can't.', he continued, while slowly retracting his hand from her waist, and got up, standing on the bed side. She went after him, placing both her arms around his neck, slowly kissing him on the left cheek, then, he put his right hand above hers. 'I know you'd prefer I stay. But, there is a lot of witcher work north, in the eastern lands of Redania and Kaedwen.'

'And travel through the snow blizzards ?', she whispered, while biting his ear lobe.

He chuckled, probably because of what she just did. 'It's even colder on Ard Skellig.'

'That is why you don't go there anymore ?', she said with an amused tone.

'Maybe.', he answered, slightly turning his head her way. 'And because of you-'. She grabbed him by the back of the head, kissing him, dragging him back in bed. He was now laying on top of her. As she placed her arms around his neck, while they kept on kissing. He grabbed her left leg while she spread the right one, as she moaned with pleasure. For she was very pleased, sexually, and in many other ways with Gerd. They were making love, as they did all night, and as they did the nights before...

She was as Gerd, a witcher. Though not from the School of the Bear, as she was among the few remaining witchers from the School of the Viper, named Ayanna of Liddertal. However, besides the two swords she wore on her back, and the silver medallion, Ayanna was far from being a true witcher. For as she told Gerd, she used to be a sickly girl when a witcher from the School of the Viper found her in the ruins of a keep. Which she used as shelter after being exiled from the village, for being suspected by the elders to be infected with a disease that plagued the village. The way she says it, only a certain kind of mutagens had been administered to her during the Trail of the Grasses. This unorthodox way of doing so cured her illness and made her immune to diseases, and allowed her body to accept certain witcher potions, such as Swallow, Thunderbolt, Tawny Owl and several others. While enhancing her senses and the ability to learn certain signs. Given why she's mostly known as an assassin. Usually working with Letho of Gulet, through which she met Gerd.

She had a long dark hair, which reached the middle of her back, usually she would gather it in a pony tail. She would always smile, only to Gerd, while biting her attractive, curved, full-bodied, rosy lips, as she would undress and show that wonderful, shaped body, with thick, muscular, thighs and calves, a supple waist and two beautiful breasts, each with a pale, wine-red areolae and a ripe cherry like nipple. Her body, just beautiful, like shaped by an elven master sculptor, who added a few scars, as her job description.

As even fewer witchers from the School of the Viper were present in Nilfgaard. Those that were not, like Ayanna, who stayed the winter at a house she owned in Nazair, where she and Gerd would often get together, in the northern cold winters and the southern hot summers.

When Gerd woke up, Ayanna was already awake for some time. She stood in front of the balcony's window, with only a transparent white ish night dress on. Gerd got out of the bed slowly and walked towards her. The wind was moving the blue curtains, as Gerd got behind her. He placed his hands on her hips, kissing her left naked shoulder. Ayanna smiled and slowly moved her head next to Gerd's, as he was resting it on her shoulder, kissing it once more.

'Are you going to leave soon ?', she said with a calmly low voice, almost, a whisper.

'I'm not going to leave now, or tomorrow. But soon. I'd like to stay one more week here, with you. If that's alright.', responded Gerd.

'I'd love that', said Ayanna. While turning around and placing her palms around Gerd's face, he then placed his right hand on hers, gazing in his eyes and he into hers, he kissed her and she kissed him. She then placed her head on his chest and her arms around his back, while Gerd moved his left hand on the back of her head and the right between her scapulas. And as he was taller than Ayanna he slowly moved his face on the top of her head, kissing it. They stayed like that for a while, with their eyes closed, embracing each other, while Nazair's breeze was slightly moving the blue curtains.

Then Gerd blinked, snapping out of it, her memory, her face and her whole being, were alike a haunting dream. But, Gerd made his choice, to leave her at the manor in Nazair, and come north. As he got closer south he kept remembering her, as the southern climate became a memory trigger. Then, he clinched his eyes together, and open them again. For her memory, wasn't what he needed at the moment. What he needed was to get Galodo's head part with the rest of his body. He needed to finish the contract.

- It wasn't what he truly wanted.-

- 'Want' and 'Need' are two different things.-

As they got out of the pass, in the afternoon, the lands beyond the Blue Mountains began to open and show their extravagance. As the mountain gradually declined to green forest hills and next into small valleys, then arid plains of dirt and further, sand, only to become later dunes of sand.

It was close to dusk, and the witcher even closer to end his contract, or so he thought. As his target entered, what from outside seemed to be a cave, but in truth it was a hut, where Galodo and his men usually stopped on their way to Zerrikania. Though, it was still a cave, considered Gerd. The witcher saw no better chance to kill then now, so he got off his horse and went on foot ahead, looking if there was anyone watching the entrance.

He approached the hideout. And as he got near the door casted the sign of Aard, blowing the door inside the cave. While the dust began to settle Gerd noticed Galodo, who was near a wall, just several steps away from the door. Gerd launched himself at him, grabbing him by the neck and slamming him against the wall, then throwing him in the opposite direction.

Galodo followed with a cough, then quickly got up and stood his guard.

'Bring it.', said the mercenary while brushing his chin with his right fist.

Gerd smiled and did as Galodo requested. The mercenary threw the first punch towards Gerd's face, a punch that Gerd avoided by simply moving his head a bit, grabbed Galodo's arm near the elbow with his right hand, pulling it down. While, his left hand and fingers clenched to the back of his head and hit Galodo with his forehead right in the bridge of the nose, after which, he gave him a strong right hook in his rectus abdominus.

The mercenary started coughing, holding a hand around his middle section, as the witcher, grabbed him by the neck, and lifted him up. Galodo's feet barely could reach the floor, with both of his hands now, around Gerd's right hand. The witcher put him through a wooden table, on his left side, so hard that the table broke on an instant, and as Gerd slammed him on the floor, the mercenary groaned with pain. With Gerd's right hand still squeezing his neck, the mercenary managed to grab a table's foot, and tried to hit Gerd. But, the witcher saw it, and the table foot shattered on his steel gauntlet. After that failed attempt, Galodo tried to punch the witcher with his left fist, but Gerd moved back, leaving the hold he had on the mercenary's neck. Who got away from the witcher, being able to reach a sword, near one of the two beds, on the other side of the cave.

Gerd gave a slight smirk, while from behind, the woman that accompanied Galodo ran towards the witcher holding a knife. Gerd turned and grabbed the woman's hand.

That woman was the mercenary's wife, Lona, that as Gerd squeezed her hand she dropped the knife. Then, Galodo attacked. He tried a lunge, then, a vertical slash which the witcher avoided, followed by a horizontal one, that as the previous had no success. Gerd took some steps back, as Galodo pushed Lona behind him, with the sword in the left hand and the right on Lona's hip, pushing her behind him, looking at Gerd while moving towards the wall next to the door that the witcher got in.

As now Galodo and his wife, were literally with their back against the wall, Gerd made a couple of steps towards the door, if one of them thought to try their way to it. Lona tried, but was stopped by her husband right hand, while Gerd stirred his head slowly in disagreement, looking at her, as he moved even closer towards the door. While Galodo and Lona moved slowly to the wall on their left, with their back against an old cabinet, which had a candle holder and a few wooden tankards on it. Setting the candle holder to fall along with a mug. As Gerd was now in front of the door, Galodo swallowed his fear, and put his both hands on the sword, while Gerd reached for his then went back, signaling with his left hand the mercenary to come, putting a slight smile to the left side of his mouth.

Galodo, in his mind, should've been unsure of what the witcher may do, even unarmed he could kill a man. But he didn't, and just reached to him with a sword slash around his hips, that Gerd evaded, as he moved forward, towards Galodo, the mercenary kept swinging his sword one more time before Gerd caught his arm. He positioned his upper arm around Galodo's forearm, and the back of his hand around Galodo's elbow, putting pressure on it. While with his left forearm, around which sat his steel gauntlet, hit the mercenary in the temple of the head, blurring his eye sight for a while. As he dropped his sword he struck him

again, with a left elbow to the ribs. Then grabbed his head, tossing it against the cabinet in front of him, then used his Aard sign that threw him against the wall next to the door.

Lona fled from her husband's back, when Gerd grabbed his arm. Then, when her husband was blown into the wall, she grabbed the sword and ran towards the witcher who was getting closer to her husband, ready to finish his contract. But, Gerd heard her stumpy steps, accompanied by her scream while she charged towards him with both of her hands on the sword, that she held above her head. Gerd stopped the blade by rising his right gauntlet in front of her strike, while slightly moving it to the right, looking at Lona, who was still screaming as she kept pushing the blade into Gerd's gauntlet. Gerd pushed down the blade grabbing it with his other hand, snatching it from Lona's grasp. She clinched her eyes closed as Gerd pushed her back, using his Aard sign. She lost her balance and fell near a bed on the opposite direction from the wall Galodo was still leaning onto.

The witcher walked toward Galodo, as he was barely able to stand straight, leaning by his shoulder against the wall, holding one hand on his head, shaking it from time to time, as his vision hasn't cleared yet.

'I'm glad I let you come like that at me.', said Gerd smiling, 'You see, I heard you were good with swords...Just exaggerated rumors it seems.', continued Gerd, as he reached for his sword.

'Time to end this.', said the witcher while stepping closer to Galodo, who was still disoriented, clinching his eyes and shaking his head.

The Bear: .I. Humble beginnings

.V. The Bear: .I. Humble beginnings.

Everything began in a cold winter's day, in the middle of Imbolc.

On a day in the middle of the week. A week in which snow kept on falling on the isles of Skellige.

In the room of a small hut in a village southeast of Kaer Gelen. A woman named Greta, gave birth to a beautiful child. With her husband, Gerst, on her right side and her sister Neena, on the left.

She held in her arms her baby, her boy, the light of her life, the one thing that she loved more than anything else.

From outside the hut you could hear among the Imbolc's violent winds, the cries of a baby, the joyful laughs of his father and the calm voice of his mother. While the snow kept falling as the cold wind stopped it from settling upon the heaps of snow that covered the ground.

'What is it my dear ? You hungry ? Yes ? Hmm, yes you are...!', said Greta playfully, while holding her son's small hands, as he held her thumb on his small palms and her fingers wrapped around his forearm. Leaning her face on his chest, while her son was smiling, giggling, touching his mother's cheeks.

'Come on. Let's feed that hungry tummy of yours...!', continued the loving mother.

Three months later, winter became spring on the lands of Skellige. The weather calmed and the men had to resume to their usual activities, fishing, hunting, and as it was Skellige, raiding. A few raids were set for the lands of Cidaris, Nilfgaard and the Arc Coast of Redania, among those excited adventure seekers was Gerst, who represented his clan, Clan Drummond. He, was also Greta's husband and he was to raid the coast villages and cities of Nilfgaard and a few others on their way there.

'Greta !', shouted Gerst as he closed the hut' door.

'Yes.', answered his wife as she rushed in the main chamber, 'What's wrong ?'.

'Wrong ? Nothing ! That's what ! Everything's bliss, my dear wife.', responded her husband with excitement.

'How so ?', asked Greta, preparing the supper for her husband.

'I'm to go on a raid three days from today. To the lands of The Black Ones.'.

'That is good.'

'Good ?! You're crazy woman ? That is a extraordinary ! Just sailing to that land will be a tremendous adventure. One in a life time. For I am to join the Jarl in one of his famous raids south, one get's this at least once in a life time, I tell yaa.'

'Alright. Now just sit your ass down and eat.', she said smiling, then she kissed her husband on the cheek.

'Very well then...', he continued as he placed his hands on his hips, holding his belt. 'But first, how is my son ?', he asked, as he went towards their son's room. 'Aha ! My dragon ! Was your mother good to you ?', from the door his wife was watching him, and subtly raised her right eyebrow. 'Hah, of course she was. One great lass she is, no one better on those damned isles.', he said with a big smile as he looked at Greta, who was smiling as well, leaning on the door jamb. He held his son up, giggling as he was pulling on his father's beard. 'Ha ! You have hands like hooks !', he giggled, then put him back in his crib.

'Now go eat, I'll put him to sleep.', said Greta as she entered the room, approaching her husband.

'Yes my dear.', he responded, kissing his wife's forehead and headed towards the kitchen and sat at the table, breaking a bread in two and started to eat. Listening to the song Greta hummed and sang to her baby.

A few hours later that same night...

'How long will you be away ?', asked Greta, as she turned, facing her husband.

'Well, the others predicted at least a few months. I, say we'll be returning in three, but, the winds seem strong. So perhaps less.'

The days passed as quick as the flashes of lighting on the sky during a storm, for the day in which Gerst had to go had come. He took his shield and axe and wore his blue Tunic and was prepared to leave for Holmstein's port, where the Jarl's fleet was awaiting.

'I love you, husband and I already count the moments until your return.', said Greta to Gerst, as he stepped out the door of their hut.

'I love you to, wife. And I shall keep you in my heart and dreams.'. He touched his forehead to hers and kissed his son's, who was in Greta's arms. 'I will come back with chest's of gold and silver.'. He then walked towards his horse, and jumped on the saddle. He looked at his wife and son then turned his head, grabbed the horse's reins and shook them, the horse began to walk and soon it began to gallop.

Greta watched him getting further until she lost his sight near the hills and woods. Then, turned and stepped inside the hut, where her sister was, Neena.

Time as it is his nature, passes. Without mercy and without looking back to those it leaves behind, those that perish due it's constant persistence. It only knows forward, and only forward will it go. The old and wise folk say 'Don't dwell in the past, look at what you have now, not what you left behind.'. For all do that, regrets of what they lost, of their decisions, of what could've been. It happens to everyone. But, nobody has ever chosen the perfect way, for there is no such thing as perfect.

Time passed, who would've thought.

Greta's son was older now, and it was only a few more weeks until his father presumed return. Who was still in his adventure on the Nilfgaardian coast, while Greta and her sister Neena were way back on Skellige Isles, on Ard Skellig. His son was now seven months old and already a restless fella, throwing spoons and bowls off the table, while his aunt, Neena, picked them up, only for him to throw them again. Babies, they grow fast and learn even faster how to get you mad. He resembled his mother in that way, as when he didn't throw them on the floor he kept knocking them against the table.

'So, we're gonna visit mother today ?', asked Neena.

'Around noon, maybe ?', responded Greta. while cleaning the kitchen table.

'That sounds good.', answered Neena.

As the Jarl, Bjorn of Drummond, was away as well. Only a few men were left to protect his domain. Thus, he asked another clan, Clan Brokvar, from which he took a dozen of men on his raid as reward, to defend the keep of Kaer Muire, and the village beneath. His wife was with child and expecting soon. As her nine months were set to come to an end in a week or so. While awaiting her husband's return from his raid.

Jarl Bjorn of Drummond was famous among his people. Still young, in his late twenties, he had to follow his father Rogar, who died in a raid on the same lands he was now. Set to avenge him, as he died at the swords of the black ones.

Like a faithful reflection of his father he was well known among his men, famous for his few, but successful raids, who brought back to the isles chests filled with gold and silver, and gained fame across the isles and fear on the continent. He was a tall, fair haired jarl of the southern side of Ard Skellige, soon to be the father of Lugos Harelip, and later the grandfather of Madman Lugos. Through him his clan gained more fame, reaching the same infamy as the other clan on the island, an Craite. Who was a powerful clan, and felt the rising strength of their southern neighbor. Considered by a few invaders, as Clan Drummond stepped into their territory, and that they should've remained on Undvik. Even though that happened a few generations back, like three centuries ago, to be exact. There were a few that kept holding onto that grudge.

Luckily, an Craite, had a wise jarl and later king. Erlend an Craite the Stonefist, who was the legendary monarch of Skellige. He did not share what the few others thought of Clan Drummond, as he accepted the pact made by his ancestors and greeted the help, strength and fame of the southern clan. Proving it with the many invitations he sent the jarl, on his festive

feasts and famous raids. He had been blessed with three children, two sons and a daughter. While his sons were still young, his daughter was at least twenty years old, ready to marry. Men from the isles and the continent trampled themselves to ask for her hand in marriage. But, she refused them all, saying with a cold tone that, 'She did not want nor need a husband at the moment'. However, she continued to be persuaded by other clans, jarl's sons, but, she didn't change her mind. As her father simply said 'She does what she wants, and I'm not the one to stop her.'. He said that during a feast as it became clear that the king, Erlend, doesn't even think to force her marry anyone.

Another day came to an end, as the sun set to dusk into The Great Sea once again. Greta with her son and sister, Neena, were at their mother's house.

It was a star filled sky night, no cloud could be seen, summer clearly had began. Between all the shining stars, the shiniest one had risen, it was the full moon.

A moon which marked an important day, the most crucial point. For it was the day everything began to fall into place.

At Verna's house, it was time for supper, as both her daughters arranged the table, while the mother filled the bowls. Greta's son was watching it all from the crib his mother placed him in, playing with a wooden spoon and slamming it from time to time against the bed's side. As the mother and her younger daughter took their places around the table, Greta fed her child before feeding herself.

'So...When does he return ?', asked the mother.

'Hmm, soon...I hope, it has been three months already, and that was two days ago.'.

'Mother, she's worried as it is. Don't make it worse.', said Neena.

'What ? I was just curious...It's alright to talk about such things, what else are we women supposed to do when our husbands are gods know where...'

'Mother...', continued Neena.

'Greta, my dear. You have not a thing to worry about, he's a handy fella, he'll be back. Now come and eat a bit, will yaa ?', said Verna, as Greta finished breast feeding her baby, sat him in his crib, and then joined the two at the table.

Some time later...

'So...Who wants a drink ?'.

'You still drink, mother ?' asked Neena.

'Of course I do, how else to kill time in your old age, huh ? Come on, I've left some wine that Gerst gave me.'.

'Gerst gave it to you ?' asked Greta.

'Yes, a few months ago. I haven't opened it yet.', she grabbed the bottle of wine from a black wooden chest beneath the window. 'Neena, get three tankards my dear.'

'I won't drink.', said Greta.

Verna scoffed. 'Just a sip. It won't do you any harm, wine is good for you.', responded Verna, while she poured into the tankards.

'Where did he get it from ?', asked Greta.

'It was meant as a gift. Were I to ask him that, it would've ruined what a gift's meaning is, my dear.'

'It is quite good.', said Neena, taking a sip.

'Is what those shitty nobles from the continent drink, at their fancy balls and what else they do...', Verna replied, taking a sip herself.

Some time later, of which mostly consisted of a few stories Neena was told by the men courting her, peppered with couple of Verna's similar experiences during her youth. Then as she further emptied the bottle of wine gifted by Gerst, she resorted as always, to tell the tale of how she met their father. All the while both Neena and Greta laughed.

'What was that ?', asked Verna, as she stood up from the chair and walked towards the door. 'What...In the name of Freya ?!'

'What is it ?', asked Neena, while Greta picked up her baby from the crib.

'Greta, take him and leave through the back door. Neena, you too.'

'What is happening ?', asked Neena again.

'An Craite ! Cursed bastards, came to slaughter us all !', answered Verna, grabbing her husband's axe. 'You must go. Now !', she continued, while the sounds of axes clashing against shields, followed by grunts, gurgling and screaming, intensified.

'But-'

'Not a word ! Leave now !'

A man wearing an Craite colors kicked the door. He managed to put one foot across it, before being struck in the middle of the head by Verna, who was unable to take the axe out of the man's skull and kicked him out, literally. Then closed the door pushing a cabinet in front of it.

'The back door. Quickly !', said Verna, as she grabbed another axe from the chest beneath the window.

As Verna cracked open the back door she saw three man outside it, she signaled her daughters to wait. When she opened the door completely she ran towards the closest one, hitting him in the back of the head, and tried to hit the other one too.

'Fuckin' Drummond wench !', said the other man as he punched her in the stomach. While the other two only a few steps further heard and came to assist.

'Is he dead ?', asked one of those that just approached them.

'What do you think, idiot ?'.

'That he is ?', said one of them.

'Let's kill the whore...!', said another.

Then, Verna punched the one holding her in the testicles, and managed to reach her axe, and threw it into the chest of the one that spoke earlier. At that moment Greta and Neena ran out of the hut, looking back at their mother who was beaten by the men, that were punching and kicking her. She stood down on her left side, with her face on the muddy road, clinching her eyes, looking at them as they ran out of the village. The men did not notice them escape as they were too occupied kicking and punching an old woman.

'We must go east, leave the island.', said Neena, as both were quickly fleeing the village. 'There is a fishing boat, I saw it a few hours ago.'.

'What if it is not there anymore ?'.

'It's there, trust me. It's Vorsh's boat. He doesn't use it so much.', responded Neena. 'Through here.'. she continued, as they took a shortcut trail to the boat, away from the main road.

Soon they came out of the small patch of woods and shrubbery covering the hill's side, which led down to the beach.

'There, I told you that it's still here. Come on.', said Neena. 'How is he ?'.

'Huh. He's asleep.', answered Greta, smiling.

'Really ?', said Neena, surprised. As they were both heading towards the boat. 'Get on...!', resumed Neena.

'I'll help you push.', continued Greta, as she put her son in the boat.

'I can do it-'.

'Hey ! What are you two doing here, exactly ?', said a man approaching behind them, and he was not alone for two more came behind him. He was one of the men that attacked the keep and the village, an Craite. 'Step away from the boat will you ? Let's have a word.', he said while rubbing his hands, with a smirk on his face.

'Stay away !', said Neena.

'Pretty hard with you looking so good.', said the man. 'Roderik, look at her. Tasty isn't she ?', he continued, as the man called Roderik, grinned, showing his rotten teeth.

'Stay right where you are !', said Neena once again, as she took a knife she had on her belt, waving it around.

'Hah. She's got a knife Roderik ! Hah ! Careful not to cut yourself darling...!', said the man laughing, looking at the man called Roderick on his left.

'I like her.', said Roderik, from between his black teeth.

'Hah ! I think he's in love !', said the man. While the one on the right smiled too.

'I-', said Neena.

'You what, huh ?', interrupted the man. 'I'll tell you what, you will just let me take some good care of you, while the other two will do the same to your friend...How does that sound ? Good, right ?', he said while he approached her.

'Don't touch me !', she yelled, while waving the knife and managed to cut the man around his hand.

'Oh, you fuckin' whore...', he said as he caught her hand and put his other one on her throat.

Neena dropped the knife as the man that caught her hand squeezed it until she did so.

Neena slapped him, and he bit her forearm, then with his left hand he held her both arms by her wrists.

'Listen, bitch ! I will fuck your every hole...', he said while he grabbed her jaw, and slowly licked her lips, and grabbed her lower lip between his. Then threw her to the ground, 'Roderik ! Hold her, she's a feisty one.'.

'I like her.', said Roderik smiling as he was holding her down.

'Tourest, take the other one.', said the man. 'Me and Roderick will take her. The other is more your type, right ?'.

'Yeah, whatever.', said Tourest, as he walked towards Greta.

'Run !', screamed Neena. 'Run !'. Greta turned around and tried to push the boat, but the man heading towards her shot her with his crossbow, right in the back. As Greta fell she grabbed the boat. Her son was on the edge, on the seat, she covered him with a blanket and moved her hand around his face, as she then pushed the boat away, right before Tourest grabbed her.

The boat went away, with her baby in it, the most important thing she had in the world. She watched as he was taken away from the shore, away from danger, the sea water carried him, to safety, as Greta's tears ran down her face and fell into the sea water, her baby, her child, was getting further from her, knowing that she will never see him again. Her child, her light.

Tourest held her down, as he began to mutter, while ripping her dress. Smiling and grunting, as he grabbed her breasts, kissing her naked shoulders. All the while he felt pleasure and she

wished for death. She heard her sister screams, but couldn't do anything about it. She felt the blood dripping from her back, and pain began to crawl itself up her left shoulder.

Suddenly the moans from behind her stopped, and a sound of someone coughing and choking replaced it. The moment Tourst turned to see what just happened his head was severed by a sword. A man, which it seemed to be a witcher and behind him, a child. A young apprentice, who helped Neena, while the older witcher helped Greta. Who began to whisper, 'The boat...my baby...'. The old witcher heard her, and told the younger one to swim towards the boat, and bring it back to shore. As the apprentice swam towards the boat he carried both women away from the beach, inside a cave, not far from the place it all happened.

When the old witcher arrived inside the cave he placed both women on a bed, and covered them with blankets. Then, he took care of Greta's wound, from which she bled out quite an important amount of blood.

As both fell asleep, the witcher washed some bloody pieces of cloth near Greta's bed, as he needed them for Greta's wound.

Later, his apprentice returned, holding a baby in his arms, who was playing with a lock of his long black hair.

'He's not even a year old yet.', said the old witcher.

'He was lucky we heard all of that...!', said the young apprentice.

'They all are.', continued the old one, looking towards the bed where Greta and Neena were.

'They're both still asleep.', murmured the young one.

'They are tired, and from what they got through, I won't condemn them if they don't want to wake up, ever again.', said the old witcher.

'What happened ? How could those men do that ?', asked the young apprentice.

'Those men or should I say animals, wore an Craite armor. Probably attacked the keep of Clan Drummond, as their's the closest...!', responded the old witcher, as he went to a table further into the cave. 'I will brew some medicine for them.', said the old witcher, as his apprentice was looking at the baby, who had his little hands wrapped around his index finger.

'The death we offered them was too kind...!', continued the young apprentice, while his master nodded his head.

The old witcher and his apprentice, had been able to intervene only because the young one had his training near the village. The cave where they took the sisters and the young child was a place where the Trail of Grasses was held and the old witcher was able to prepare the necessary medicine, at an alchemy table.

Both of them tried to save Greta, but she had lost too much blood and had her right lung pierced, which was filled with blood. She soon started coughing, even then, the old witcher tried to save her, as he managed to get some of the blood out from the lung. She only got to

thank him for saving her son, as the old witcher promised to take care of her child, then she began to talk about her husband. That if he could, when the Jarl returns to look for him, and to tell Gerst about what happened. After, she told him about Neena for a bit, then she stopped and wished to see her son. The young apprentice brought him to her.

Greta, gave her last breath as she was holding her child.

When Neena woke up, the old witcher had left the cave. The apprentice said he went to look for some herbs, after which he told her about her sister. Neena started crying, as she looked at her nephew and walked towards him, taking him in her arms holding him to her chest as she was still sobbing, shivering, from the depth of her heart, while the child was sucking on his thumb, looking at the young apprentice, with his bright blue eyes, clueless of what was or will be.

Gerst did return. Five days later, only to find that his wife, her sister and her mother were dead, and so was his son. He fell on his knees when he received the news, staring at the ground, with his eyes largely open and mouth. As he later screamed, punching the ground, until his fists began to bleed, then looked at the sky, as two tears slid down his face.

When the boats arrived on the southern shore of Ard Skellig, the head of Clan an Craite, jarl Erlend an Craite the Stonefist, awaited Bjorn of Drummond. To explain that what just happened had nothing to do with him and that anyone else involved will be judged not by him but by the Drummond Clan, for he and his people will know the best punishment for them. Jarl Bjorn also demanded that the families that were affected will each receive a chest full with gold, and that Erlend's daughter has to leave the isles.

The daughter of Erlend an Craite had to leave the isles for the one that led the attack wanted to take the southern side of the island back, thinking that it will convince the jarl that he is the right one to take his daughter hand in marriage, for he gave Ard Skellig back to an Craite. A couple of years later she married a Cintrian noble and lived in the city of Cintra, often in the summer, she visited her husband sister, that resided near the town of Attre.

The jarl's wife was in the keep at the moment of the attack, after they finished with the village the attackers went towards the keep were Clan Brokvar stopped them, killing every last one of them, none escaped and none died an easy death.

From that moment Clan Drummond hated the an Craite, and as time passed more incidents occurred between the two, empowering Clan Drummond's hate.

Neena never went back to the village, instead, she went with her nephew to the keep of the School of the Bear. Where she took care of him, and assisted him through his training, even as he was undertaking the Trail of the Grasses.

She didn't tell him about what happened with his mother and father, or that she was his aunt, or his birth name until the moment of her death, many decades later. But, in the end he remained with the name he knew was truly his, **Gerd of Skellige**, a witcher from the School of the Bear.

Gerd's father, Gerst of Clan Drummond, died of old age, on the isle of Ard Skellige. He never married again and never knew that his son was the famous witcher. He lived the life of a fisherman and never joined the jarl on his raids ever again.

The Bear: .II. Slayers of Monsters

.VI. The Bear: .II. Slayers of Monsters.

The knowledge of the monster slayers was passed from master to apprentice, it was trained, taught, exercised and perfected by each witcher, according to the specific methods their school used.

Besides the hard and perilous training, a witcher had to learn, by memorizing each entry in the bestiary of his school. Or at least some of it, so then later the knowledge had to be absorbed by both mind and body, as they had to be in a perfect balance.

One witcher couldn't learn enough from the old books and parchments as they had to experience the information they learned on their hunts. As the path of a witcher was the hardest learning process of them all, for there is where all the witchers found their death. That's what the path truly was, an end...

- Munir Kalggo, 'Enciclopedia Mundi', Chapter .XI. Witchers.

Gerd of Skellige, was now older, around his forth decade of life. A witcher of the School of the Bear.

'Hah, I win again !', shouted Gerd, as he was playing cards with a colleague witcher.

'Lucky hand. Three out of five ?', said the other.

Gerd clicked his tongue. 'I can't refuse. Beside you're on a losing streak...!'

'Not for long.', said the other witcher.

'However you fancy, sir.', said Gerd, with a ridiculing tone.

Some time later...

'Shit ! How the fuck you beaten me so many times ?'.

'Well it seems the apprentice has outgrown his master. Right ? Master...!', said Gerd with a smile on his face.

'Go plough yourself...!', said the other witcher as he threw the cards he had left in his hand on the wooden table.

It was winter on the lands of Skellige, past Imbolc, now awaiting the refreshing spring. At the School of the Bear keep on Ard Skellig, around four witchers were present, among them was Gerd. As the weather calmed and the sun finally appeared after some days in which it kept on

snowing, which as expected showed it's teeth, as it may have given the day a warmer touch, but the wind was biting still. He decided to go out for a while, to take a walk, to stretch his muscles and bones. Also to take his mare for a stroll, as she felt quite bored in the gloomy stables.

'Going out ?', asked a woman. Which was Neena, now around sixty summers old, more or less.

Gerd nodded. 'It's about time, been inside for a while now...!'

'Well...It is quite a jolly weather, as the blizzards stopped.', continued Neena.

'Want something from the village ?', asked Gerd, as he got up his horse.

'No...!', responded Neena.

From the entrance of the keep another witcher stepped out for a walk, it was Ksander of Vicovaro. With long black hair, that he was gathering in a ponytail, clean shaved, with two thick eyebrows, and a set of scars on his left cheek received from an Alp last Yule, that he hunted in Vicovaro. Wearing a black armor with light steel plates on his shoulders and a black bear pelt hanging on his back. Two light steel gauntlets as well, with a long mantle coming down behind his legs and around, near his black leather belt and on his back two swords as usual, with the head of a bear on each's pommel and a crossbow next to them.

He was quite a charming witcher, with a taste in good women, especially of noble origins. As he was a handsome chap, with a very edgy jaw, with a adam's apple on his neck that the ladies just couldn't resist, bellow which hanged his bear head shaped medallion. He was a known adventurer as far a witcher goes and an even better one among his female companions, as he liked to play their games, with which he'd make them follow him like a dog to a good, healthy bone.

'Gerd, my friend. Planning to go somewhere without me ? Your best pal ?' said Ksander, as he approached the stables to take his horse. That he called Madness, a black Zerrikanian steed, that he won in a game of cards in Maribor.

'Good day, mam', he continued, kissing Neena on the cheek, now taking the harness for his horse. 'Gerd, wait for me, will you ?'

'Just be quick...!', responded Gerd as he was on his horse outside the stables.

'Almost there, just got to brush him a bit...!', replied Ksander.

'Where are you two planning to go ?', asked Neena.

'There's that village down the eastern hills. They have quite a nice Inn, and even better women...', said Ksander with a slightly raised voice from the stables.

'Well, just don't do anything stupid this time. Alright ?'

'We won't if folk would stop saying that 'We're cheating sons of a whore', after losing a fuckin' game of cards...', responded Ksander from within the stables.

'Gerd, take care he doesn't get in trouble again...And please, don't do it like the last time.', said Neena.

'If they would come without a sword or an axe at me for once...Maybe I'll punch them all this time...', responded Gerd.

'From what I heard you did that last time. Just be sure it doesn't come to that, alright ?', replied Neena.

'I guess I will try ?', said Gerd, as Neena's brows lowered a bit.

'He'll do his best, I know it.', said Ksander as he stepped out of the stables holding his horse by the reins, then jumped in the saddle.

'Let's go.', continued Ksander as he approached Gerd, 'See you later, Neena.'.

As they both left through the gate of the keep, Neena waved to them, then turned and went inside the old keep.

'So they've left again, huh ?'.

'Mhm.', murmured Neena.

'They are still young...', continued the old witcher, Mousar. 'Come. Let us old timers have a drink.'.

Mousar, was the old witcher that saved Neena, forty years ago. He was old, really old, as his hair was grey and his beard too. He would easily stand out from the other witchers as he had darker skin, for he was of Oferi origins. As more then a century and a half ago, his parents decided to move on this side of the Great Sea. After that, some time later they had a child, then as the old man tells it, a great catastrophe took place and he was orphaned. A few weeks later a witcher found him in the cellar of a house in a village in the middle of nowhere, fed him, and took him to the isles of Skellige, where he became a witcher.

'Why didn't you ask me to come along ?', asked Ksander as they were heading towards the village. 'Got something to do ? Regarding a secret ?', continued the witcher, with a slight smile.

'Not a thing.', answered Gerd calmly.

'That is all you. The embodiment of a witcher... No emotions. Not even a mere slight difference on your face. The old man must be proud of you, Gerd, the unmovable heart...' said Ksander mockingly, smiling.

'Funny, but still...', said Gerd as he casted a spell of Axii on Ksander's horse, which suddenly stopped. 'Hah, now that's funny...!'

'Yeah, very...', continued Ksander from behind, as his horse stood still like a stump.

After a while they reached the village. Which was as lively as a bear's cave in the winter. Almost, as near the inn, several drunken men were heading home. Perhaps...

As Gerd and Ksander got passed the door of the inn, it seemed like the whole village lived in it. As almost all the tables were full and even the floors. For a few other drunken men failed to reach the door and one stood right next to it. One was resting his head on a bottle. Others were laying between the tables or leaned on the nearest wall. Such fun was at an inn in the middle of the winter on Skellige, that the only way to pass time was to get yourself pissed drunk all day.

Finally, Gerd and Ksander found a table after searching for an unoccupied one for some time...

'Good ! We've found one. If we wouldn't. I would've had to start a brawl with someone for a damned table...Glad to get that thought out of my head.', said Ksander.

Then he looked around and fixed his eyes on someone he knew...

'Lilly !', shouted Ksander, 'Get us some drinks !'. The girl nodded her head and quickly grabbed two tankards, filled them, and brought them to the table where the two were staying.

'Nice seeing you two here.', said Lilly, the innkeeper's niece and help, 'Here are your drinks...'

'Nice seeing you as well. How's that 'issue' we had last time ?', responded Ksander.

'Healed and ready...If you still want to, you know...'

'Why do you think I'm here ?', replied Ksander, with a perverted smile, as his right hand went under the woman's dress.

'Come on then. Let's go upstairs...', she said, as she grabbed his arm.

'I'll be back soon, an hour maybe-'

'A bit more I think...', interrupted Lilly, as she slowly placed her hand on Ksander's chest, biting her lip.

'Hmm, or like she said.', he continued.

'Just go.', said Gerd.

'Alright...', responded Ksander. 'Oh, my drink...', as he reached to grab his tankard.

As said, witcher Ksander was something that women couldn't resist, and couldn't stop themselves from wanting his manly parts into theirs. While the woman called Lilly and Ksander made their way upstairs, they had to avoid a few obstacles, like drunken men barely walking towards the door. Or those who tried but stopped for a quick nap on the wooden wet

floor. On which was either mud or spilled vodka, ale or beer, maybe piss too. Gerd remained alone at the table, he only got to take a sip from his drink for soon someone shouted his name...

'Gerd, witcher...I need your attention, please...'. A woman's voice. A woman that Gerd knew, pretty well. She took a seat across the table.

'Vera, nice seeing you here...!', said Gerd.

'Likewise, witcher.', responded Vera, as she leaned onto the table. 'I got a job proposal for you...!'

'Huh, is it a good one ?'.

'Very, so what do you say ?'.

'What is it ?'.

'The man behind my left shoulder. See him ?'.

'I do...!'

'That man, claims he owns a property in Cintra that he just bet on a game of cards-'.

'Thus, you want me to play him ? He's bluffing...!', Gerd interrupted.

'Even so, nobody defeated him...!', she said, as she looked over her left shoulder. 'Yet...!'

'Nobody ?', asked Gerd, kinda surprised.

'Not a soul, what do you think ?'.

'Firstly. If I were in the situation he's in, the whole inn would've accused me of cheating and ask for my head. But that foreigner still breathes. How's that ?'.

'You know why. Anyway...Will you play him ? You could even make him bet something a bit more-'.

'I will, and I am gonna win.', said Gerd as he got up and walked towards the table the man was at.

'Greetings there, friend. Heard you've bet your estate ?'.

'That is correct. Do you wish to play me for it ?'.

'Why not, but how about you add something more tangible. Like gold...!'

'Why is that ?', asked the Redanian.

'I'm not sure. But, I don't buy the tale regarding this property of yours...!'

'Are you calling me a liar ? I assure-'.

'Why bet it on a game of cards ?', interrupted Gerd.

'I want to get rid of it...'.

'You could...Sell it.'.

The man scoffed. 'If it would be that easy...Don't overreact, but...I think its haunted. I tried to ask for my coin back, but they said all estate transactions are final...Thus, I found this the best way to rid myself of it...', he whispered as he leaned closer to Gerd.

'I'm a witcher, I could solve your problem.'.

'Yes, but I still have to get rid of it...You see, my wife, she's not aware of its existence. If she isn't already...', the redanian sighed. 'And with the fortune I've had this far she might know I've withdrawn eighteen thousand crowns out of the account. She'll kill me...Even worse, divorce me.'.

'But if I get rid of the creature haunting your property, you'll be able to sell it.'.

'No...I won't. You see, nobody bought that place from the previous owner, until I did. For some reason everyone knew it was haunted, but none told me...Even though I asked if it had any issues...Everyone I asked, told me it had none.', continued the man.

'Therefore, you can't sell if no one wants to buy...', said Gerd, leaning away from the table, placing one hand on it.

'Exactly...I'm doomed, sir, doomed...', responded the gentleman with anger.

'What now ? What will you do ?'.

'I can't look my wife in the eyes anymore. I won't go back...She's going to bury me...'.

'She's not going to do such thing. Calm down.'.

'Oh, but you don't know my wife, master. She can be...fierce. She could kill a fiend just by staring at it.'.

'I doubt that...', responded Gerd. 'What if you tell her that you've been robbed on the road ?'.

'N...No !' shouted the man, while his face grew pale as he heard what the witcher just said, hitting the table. The people near the table stopped and looked in his direction. 'Ahem. That is unacceptable I won't bet another two thousand crowns !'. After that everyone looking at him resumed to their chatting and drinking, swearing, brawling and knife throwing.

'Ahem...'. He cleared his throat again, then resumed. 'I shan't lie to my wife. At all ! Or even about something like that. For among other things, she is alike me, a scholar. Mainly preoccupied with psychology. And she's among the very good ones.'.

'So...?', asked Gerd.

'So...She can smell a lie from Novigrad's hierarchy to the Nilfgaard's throne...', he whispered desperately, so that a vein bulged up on his forehead.

'Aha...!'

'Thus...I'm dead.' he continued.

'What if you tell, you know...The truth?', Gerd suggested, curious of what the redanian would say.

'I think she'll put her hands around my throat and squeeze until I'm breathless...!'

'I think she'll understand and forgive you.'!

'Not my wife. She is merciless, the only thing I see in telling her that is my own death.'!

'Has she ever been like that towards you?'.

'No. Because I never did anything to anger her nor annoy her, until now... I've dedicated each moment I had free to her...!'

'That's because she loves you, isn't that why she married you?'.

'I...I think that is correct. Are you saying she may...Forgive me?'

'How long have you been gone?'.

'Months. Half a year now. Why?'.

'She probably misses you. And she is perhaps worried.'!

'You might be right. This might work after all...I'm also one month later than I predicted...Worried you say?', continued the scholar, as he continued thinking about what Gerd told him.

'I've reached a conclusion, and I think you are right. If she divorces me, I, as a man, have to accept I've made a mistake. Thus I shall return home. You, sir, have helped me, a stranger, with a good advice, 'always tell the truth'. I thank you and since you wanted the villa. I offer it to you, here's the key and a map with the exact location. Now if you excuse me I have a wife to apologize to. Have a good day, and how you witchers say it? Aha! Good luck on the path.'!

'Thanks. Good luck to you as well.', replied Gerd.

'Oh!', he said, turning back. 'If your travels ever find you in Novigrad, please visit. You only have to ask around about me, Walt Von Svarnst, and the people will point you towards my home. Thank you again.', he continued, as he headed to the door, while going around and over the drunk men lying on the floor.

Then, Vera quickly approached the table...

'Well ? You won ?', asked Vera.

'Didn't have to, here.'

'What do you mean, you didn't have to ?'.

'Long story, just take the key.'

'He did seem to happy for someone who lost...'

'Dammit. We didn't play, he gave me the key because the estate is haunted.'

'What !? I don't want it then.', she said, as her hand quickly moved away from the key Gerd placed on the table.

'I will come with you and take care of the problem...'

'Oh, alright then, I'll take it.'

'I, will keep the map.'

'Yeah, it fits you better than I.', said Vera, smiling.

'You know...', continued Vera, 'It's always nice doing business with you.'

'Same...', responded Gerd, as he grabbed another sip from his tankard.

A several minutes after that, Gerd and Vera where still chatting and drinking. Ksander was still upstairs with Lilly. And the rest of the inn was still full. Now the ones who slept on the floor, awoke, as others had to take their place. Such is the circle of life...

As the noise of laughs, punches hitting faces and knives impaling into the wooden wall. A man walked in, agitated, looking left and right, then asked around. And as he had no success finding the ones he looked for, he shouted...

'The Witchers ! Have you seen two witchers in here ?!' shouted the man, as the people in the inn looked towards the one he asked for. Gerd, sitting at a table, with his tankard near his mouth, and across him on the other side of the table was Vera. As the man quickly went to the table they were at.

'What is it this time ?', asked Gerd, as he put his tankard on the table, looking at the man that asked about him.

'So...Something happened. Will you come with me ?', asked the man, who was clearly nervous about something.

'Someone...Died ?', asked Gerd, as the man only approved by nodding his head. 'I'll come. But I must get my friend, alright ?'.

'Ye...Yes.', answered the man. While Gerd got up and went towards the stairs.

'Come, take a seat...Here, drink.', said Vera as the man sat down next to her.

Soon, after the obstacle course he had to pass through, he made it upstairs. As from a room, not far from the stairs, a woman's moans could be heard. Gerd went and knocked on that door...Nothing. He did it once more and the same result. Then he took a step back and kicked the door open...

'What the hell !?', yelled Ksander. 'If you wanna join us this is clearly not the best moment...!'

'Come on ! We have a problem to solve.', said Gerd.

'But-'

'No. Put your clothes on and let's go.'.

Ksander reached for his trousers, while Lilly said nothing, as she was lying on the bed with the witcher on top of her. She got up and walked to the table near the window and poured herself a glass of wine. Naked, as if Gerd wasn't even there. Then, as she finished her drink from one sip, she looked towards Gerd...

'Who is it this time ?', she asked, leaning on the table, with her legs crossed and her hands on the side of the table. Pushing her chest out, showing out her round breasts.

'Don't know yet. The one that told me seemed too shocked to talk details...!'

'Huh, the poor man.'. She replied, pouring herself another glass of wine.

'I have to go. See you later...!', said Ksander, as he kissed Lilly, then joined Gerd.

The two witchers hurried downstairs. 'You really know how to ruin-', Ksander said, before he was cut short by Gerd.

'Not now...!', interrupted Gerd. As they approached the table the man was at.

'Vera. Nice to see you.', said Ksander, while Vera didn't reply.

'Show us where...!', said Gerd to the man, who got up and went ahead, as the two witchers followed.

The man led them behind the Inn, on a small path that went up a hill, where a hut and a well was. Down the hill, on the trail was a man's corpse in a puddle of blood, which was almost frozen.

'What is your name ?', Ksander asked the man, as they were both walking behind Gerd by some distance.

'Hendrik. My older brother owns the inn and my daughter works there, Lilly. You've probably saw her.', the man replied as they were advancing towards the base of the hill.

'Yes... We've met.', replied Ksander.

When the two arrived where the corpse was, Gerd was already checking it for a while...

'Did you knew him ?', asked Gerd.

'Yes... He's my wife's brother eldest son, Erik.', said Hendrik, as he got closer to the body as well.

'He died at least an hour ago...', said Gerd. 'He ran from something and fell. Tumbling down the hill, cracking his skull on that rock over there...'. Gerd added, pointing to a rock a few meters away, near the path that led uphill.

'I say... Angry husband found him in bed with his wife. He bolted out the door... Hampered his left foot on something then tumbled down the hill...', said Ksander.

'No way.', replied Hendrik, 'He lived up there with his wife, Agnes.'.

'Have you checked the hut ?', asked Ksander.

'No. For when I saw him lying here, I ran straight towards the inn to get you...'.

'We'll go up, you go back to the inn...', said Gerd.

'Alright then.', responded the man.

While both witchers went up the path leading towards the top of the hill...

'You know it might be a death that had nothing to do with a monster. Right ?' asked Ksander.

'I know, but it's better than sitting and doing nothing.', responded Gerd.

'I wasn't doing nothing, though...' said the other witcher.

'If you say so.', continued Gerd.

'Anyhow... You and Vera. What's there between you two ? Have you done it ? Must have, at least once...', said Ksander. Gerd seemed quite uninterested in what he was saying, as he used to say a lot, all the time.

'Did not.', answered Gerd.

'You're killing me. When was the last time you had a good woman ? Because let me tell you. That one, is perfect...'

'Then, she's yours...'

'Hah. I've tried, but for some reason she never liked me much. She does fancy you though.', responded Ksander, looking around, walking behind Gerd.

'That's bad.', said Gerd looking uphill.

Ksander scoffed. 'Right, you tell me ? I can get any woman I want, but not her, that really-'.

'Not that you idiot, look.', Gerd noticed a second body, standing in the door, with its face pointing down, its top half outside the hut and the other inside it. 'I guess that's the wife.', continued Gerd, as he quickened his steps.

'Shit. Not a single drop of blood, huh ?'.

'A specter, damn.', said Gerd. 'Help me move the body...'. They both grabbed the woman's corpse and placed it on the bed inside the hut, covering it with a blanket.

'I guess we have to wait now...', continued Ksander.

'While we do that, we must find the cause it appeared here...', said Gerd, then stepped outside, looking around the hut, and inside the well near it.

'Maybe...Hendrik knows something. I could go talk to him ?', replied Ksander.

'It's a good idea, go...'.

'On it. I'll be back soon.', responded Ksander, as he went down the path.

While Ksander went to ask Hendrik about the history behind the hut on the hill, Gerd began to brew a potion and apply specter oil to his silver sword. It was still day light outside, as the sunset was an hour away and the specter had appeared during the day, Gerd thought it may be a noon wraith, but it could be only a simple wraith. However, it was an unusual one, as it seemed it had no specific time it appeared, so being prepared was a must.

Half an hour later...

Inside the hut, Gerd was sitting near the fireplace, awaiting Ksander's return.

'You're back. What did you learn ?', asked Gerd, as the door opened.

'Nothing important. Just that it was abandoned for a time, then, Erik took it. That is it, nothing about a previous owner...', answered the other witcher, approaching the fireplace.

'There is something that binds the specter to this place. We, just have to find it.'.

'A curse, maybe ?', asked Ksander.

'Not in this case...'.

'Well there must be-'.

'Hear that ?'.

'What ? The wind ?'.

'No, not that. The boards...', said Gerd, as he moved away an old rug. Under which, the boards seemed to have been removed in the past.

Gerd punched through the floor, and as he removed a few other planks, he noticed a locked wooden chest, which was lying beneath the hut for some time.

'What do we have here ? A stash ?', said Ksander as he placed one hand on the rotten wooden chest. Then broke the lock with his gauntlet.

Gerd opened the chest...

His face frowned at the sight of...

'Bones. Human. Belonging to a female...', said Gerd.

'It seems we've found the 'cause'. Now we have to find the problem...Or wait for it.', responded Ksander.

'A journal. Owned by...Aaliyah...', said Gerd, picking up the dusty notebook, placed on one side of the chest.

'Her name, perchance ?', asked Ksander, looking at the chest filled with bones.

'I think so. Here- The last entry...', answered Gerd. 'She mentions living with a man she loved. But, her family wanted her to marry another, a noble's son. And, as she mentions here, she chose to leave, Volge. And marry the one chosen by her parents...', Gerd continued, as he walked towards the fireplace.

'Wild guess...But, she tried, didn't she ?', began Ksander. 'He killed her, and put her bones in a chest beneath this hut, then he lived happily ever after...', he continued, as he was walking to the opposite side of the room, quite annoyed.

'Damn. So, is it hate that still binds her to this realm ? Or is it...', said Gerd, as he got up, and took the chest outside. 'We can't bury her remains here, as it's a source of her suffering. She did mention though, that she loved riding among the woods...'

'That could work...', replied Ksander.

'Come, I know just the place.', continued Gerd as he took the bones inside the chest and walked towards the Inn to get his mare, while Ksander took the journal and did the same.

'What is this ?' said Ksander, as from the journal a piece of paper slipped out, on it was written the followings:

'Aaliyah, my love. If I won't have you, no one will. I am the one you truly love, not him ! A man that you never met, nor did like as you grew up. I'm your true love, as you are mine. I won't let your parents push you into marrying someone that won't make you happy. I will see

that he won't marry you. Only I can. Whatever I will do...I did because I loved you, Aaliyah...', signed by the man called Volge.

'Fuckin' idiot ! He took her life, so she won't marry someone else...', continued Ksander, as he walked behind Gerd. Soon they both reached the Inn and took their horses, heading towards the forest on the other side of the hill.

While the two witchers were riding to the forest, the light of day began to decrease, as the dark night quickly covered the lands from east to west and the temperature began to drop.

When the witchers entered the woods, it was dark already. They've found a rest place for Aaliyah's remains, near an old tree. Ksander dug the hole, while Gerd made a fire.

'Done...', said Ksander as he approached the fire.

'Here, have some.', replied Gerd, giving Ksander a slice of cooked meat.

While the two witchers ate, as they had to restock some energy, that they will need later...

'What's next for you come spring ?', asked Gerd biting from his slice of meat.

'I don't know yet. There's a couple more weeks till we leave, I got plenty of time. I did think about heading up north, maybe Kovir or Redania. You ?'.

'I might tag along, for a while...'.

'That sounds good. We haven't worked a contract together for some time. Sounds right. Let's drink to it.', replied Ksander, pulling a bottle from his saddle's satchel.

'Why not...'.

'You know, after all these years, I think I like being a witcher...', began Ksander. 'Spending my time hunting down ghouls, strigas and drowners, feels just much better than wasting your life as a merchant, with a wife and children. Or a moody politician...Ugh.', he said as he drank from a bottle of vodka, then passed it to Gerd. 'I'm glad that the old man found me, he gave me a hand to grab onto, unlike the others who would throw rocks at me...', he then took another sip from the bottle that Gerd gave back. 'How about you ? I never asked.'.

'Me ? I don't complain. I was brought to the keep when I was barely eight months old, so...I don't know what I could've been if I was not a witcher.'.

'I know, I was there. I must've been around ten years old...That was some long time ago.', responded Ksander, passing the bottle to Gerd.

'It was...'.

Then they kept drinking, as Gerd was tending to the fire, throwing from time to time some wood in it. While Ksander looked up, at the clear winter night sky.

It was almost midnight now. As the moon had not risen yet, the only light source into the woods was the fire. Around which Gerd and Ksander stood, flickering, as small sparks were rising among the trees of the fir forest, casting the shadows of the two witchers on the snow covered ground.

As from the fresh dug grave, a grim sensation was present. The fire was casting a shivering shadow of a wooden plank placed on top of the grave, while the fire snarls echoed through the woods. Soon, a figure had risen from the grave, a ghostly one, followed by a scream of such a terrifying resonance that it would make the bones of any usual men tremble and their bodies to freeze, leaving them to the will of the ghostly figure.

'It's here...', murmured Gerd, as he grabbed his silver sword.

'It was about time.', continued Ksander, doing the same.

The two witchers approached, and were now walking around the wraith, with their oiled swords in hand. Ksander ventured first as he casted the sign of Yerden. Forcing the immaterial figure to turn material. While Gerd, from behind the specter, tried a first slash, but, as he driven his blade close to the specter it disappeared, reappearing behind him, as it moved it's rusty sword to puncture his back. Ksander quickly threw a Moon Dust bomb, making the specter retreat once more.

'This is not going to end very soon...', said Ksander. as he and Gerd were back to back, moving in circles with their silver sword in both hands.

'Right...', responded Gerd, as he casted Yerden around him and Ksander.

'There !', shouted Gerd, and managed to hit the wraith this time with a diagonal slash, disappeared again. Reappearing in front of Ksander who stopped it's blade, and while moving aside, he was able to strike as well.

The specter grew weaker by each blow the witchers dealt. It's screams were heard among the woods, as on the snowy ground the fire casted the two shadows of the witchers and the trees, reaching out towards the dark. Accompanied by the sound of blades clashing against one another. And suddenly an even louder scream was heard, the roaring fire became extinguished. The fir trees shook and the growl of the specter was the only thing that could be perceived, among the dark trees. As then an unsettling silence fell upon the woods, while from west a cutting cold wind began to blow, rustling the tall trees.

Soon, the wraith attacked, spinning in a whirlwind.

The two witcher managed to escaped it's blow. But each went a different direction, as the specter disappeared once again.

Reappearing behind Ksander, who barely managed to escape the wraith's sword. As it went from his left shoulder to his right hip, then back, cutting a couple of his hair locks. While Gerd approached from behind the specter and slashed it. As it once again disappeared and reappeared on the other side where Ksander predicted it would. And with a leap, he gave

another hit. Quickly followed by Gerd, ending it once and for all. The specter screamed for the last time as it now left this world for good.

'Now you can rest in peace, Aaliyah.', said Ksander, touching the grave.

Then they sheathed their silver swords, grabbed their horses and headed back to the village, where they would have to spend the night.

As they reached the village and soon entered the inn, at a table near the door sat Hendrik, next to him his daughter Lilly and across the table his brother. As he saw the witchers enter the door he stood up and walked towards them.

'Have you taken care of it ?', asked Hendrik, rubbing his sweaty palms.

'We did.', answered Gerd.

'Was it truly a wraith ?', he asked again.

'It was, we got rid of it...', responded witcher Ksander.

'Thank you...Here, some coin.', said Hendrik, giving the witcher a pouch of gold.

'We would need two rooms...', said Gerd.

'Sure, I will speak to my brother about it. While I do so, take a seat, eat, drink...You deserve it.', responded Hendrik.

As Hendrik went to the table where his daughter and brother were, Hendrik's brother asked Lilly to serve the witchers as he was talking with her father. So, Lilly went towards the table the two witchers sat at.

'What may I serve you ?', asked Lilly.

'Something to drink and two steaks with potatoes, if you may.', responded Ksander. Lilly nodded and went to get the drinks and cook the meat and boil the potatoes. After which she served the drinks and sat down at the same table with them, as she waited for the meal to cook.

'What happened ?', asked Ksander.

'My cousin died...', she answered slightly annoyed, from across the table.

'I know...Stupid question. But, besides that.', responded Ksander, looking her in the eyes.

'I don't know what my uncle will tell my father. As he asked me to come and serve you...', she said, worried.

'What ? You think he'll tell him about us ? I don't think he even noticed it.'.

'You are not very assuring, you know...'

'Calm down, he doesn't know, trust me.', replied Ksander, as he drank from his tankard.

The inn was almost empty, besides a couple of drunk men, that were still asleep at a table in the left corner. It was past midnight and soon Hendrik came to the table to tell the witchers that he got them the rooms, and that they shan't pay for them. Soon after that the food was ready and Lilly served it to the witchers. As they ate and drank, the other drunk men inside the inn woke up and went home.

After they finished eating, the two witcher from the School of the Bear went to their rooms upstairs and of course, Lilly joined Ksander in his room.

For Gerd, as he entered the room, someone was expecting him. A redhead woman, naked, sitting on the side of the bed, with her legs crossed, reading a book that she held in her right hand, while her other hand was placed on her legs and kept spinning in her palm a key.

'How did you know they gave me this room ?', asked Gerd, as he entered the room, closing the door behind him.

'I told them that we would share it...', answered the woman.

'So...You planned this, huh ?', he asked, as he took off his gauntlets.

'That's right...', replied the woman as she walked towards Gerd. Helping him take off his chest armor, while he placed his swords on a table near the door.

Then she slowly started kissing his chin, reaching for his lower lip, as her hand went down in his trousers.

'Come...To the bed.', she whispered as Gerd grabbed her by her waist and lifted her up. She clutched her legs around his hips and her arms around his neck, as he took her to the bed. While he grabbed and spread her round butt cheeks, while she was kissing him with passion.

When he got to the bed, Gerd, slowly placed her on it and as he took off his trousers and boots, she laid on her back in the bed. She grabbed his hand and pulled him in bed, as Gerd moved on top of her, kissing her red lips, as her blue eyes were slowly closing. He then started to kiss his way down her neck, towards her left shoulder where she had a scar. Then, centered his attention on her breasts, as he kissed, sucked and licked her perky, reddish, nipples for some time, while she let out a couple of soft giggles. He then continued to move further down, exploring her curvaceous body. With kisses down her abdomen and then went even lower where he remained for a while. Her hands moved on Gerd's head and from time to time she placed her right one on and between her breasts, while arching her back. Pushing her head against the bed slowly turning it left and right, moaning and constantly biting and sucking her lower lip as a result of the immense pleasure.

The woman was Vera, she always had a weak spot regarding Gerd. Certainly due to the many profitable jobs she did with the witcher. For they began working together since he once helped her retrieve some rubies for a cintrian nobleman. And since then, they kept working certain jobs. Developing an on-off relationship with each other.

The paths we walk

.VII. The paths we walk.

The sky darkened as the sunlight began to decrease with each breath, each blink of the eye, everything became darker, it was the middle of the day, yet, it was darkness outside.

Was it Ragh nar Roog ? The Second Conjunction of the Spheres ? Will the White Frost follow ?

Nothing like this had been witnessed in the previous century...

Were the gods furious ?

Did they extinguished the sun ? Punish the whole known world ? Was it the end ?

The streets of the great cities on this side of the continent were filled with people, priests and guards, scholars and peasants, watching as the skies blackened and the sun became complete black, covered by a circular object, as only a ring of light was left on it's edges. Among those people was a tall, strange individual, wearing a black cloak, which was covering his head. Next to him two scholars, who were watching the phenomenon through some special lenses that they were holding in front of their eyes.

'This is spectacular, Ren, a full solar eclipse...', spoke one, with a wondrous tone.

'Yes- Yes it is. My, look...', responded the other, as his mouth was fully open.

'Incredible, to witness such a phenomenon...', spoke the first.

While from behind a young woman approached...

'An eclipse you say ?', asked the young woman.

'Yes, here look through these.', he said, handing the lens to the young woman.

Then she placed it in front of her left eye and looked through the lens, the scholar remained silent and watched her. Awaiting to see her reaction and what she would say after...

'Amazing, isn't it ?', the scholar asked, eager to hear a response from the beautiful young woman.

'Yes, it is beautiful...', responded the young woman, slowly smiling as she was looking through the lens.

'First time observing such event ?', asked the scholar.

'Yes.', she quickly answered, as she kept on looking at the astronomical event.

'What is your name ?', asked the scholar, a rather whisper.

'What ?', asked the young woman, as she slightly turned her head looking his way.

'Your name...? What is your name ?', he asked again, properly.

'Oh, sorry...Astrid.', she answered, as she stopped looking at the sky, taking a look at the one that asked her name, while with her left hand she pulled several locks of her hair that were standing in front of her eye and left side of the face, behind her ear.

The scholar remained speechless, lost in her emerald eyes, perhaps, as she then charmingly smiled.

'Are you alright ?', she asked.

'Y-Yes, of course, it is a beautiful name...', he responded.

She continued smiling. 'What is yours ?', she asked, looking at the scholar. Who at that moment was staring down. Admiring the cobblestone covered street, perhaps.

'Marcus...', he responded, as his head moved back up, his eyes meeting hers, again.

'Yours it's beautiful as well.', replied the young woman called Astrid, as she smiled looking at the scholar, who if not for the lack of light, probably blushed a bit.

Behind them was the strange individual. He wasn't observing the phenomenon, for he was awaiting someone, and shortly that someone arrived. It was a woman, wearing a shorter cloak, she stopped next to him and handed him a package...

'It is done.', she said. 'Meet us near the ruins of Fort Ayeen Shae.', she continued, then turned away and left. The mysterious man said no word, only nodded his head. As he then moved forward, towards the scholar, Marcus, who was talking with Astrid, still.

'Marcus.', spoke the tall man, with a thick voice.

'Yes, what is it ?', asked the scholar.

'I have to go, tell him it is done...', as he gave something from the package to the scholar, 'We'll speak about your problem when I return.'

'Alright.', responded the scholar.

Then the man in the black cloak left the crowded market square. While the light of the sun began to reappear, as the eclipse was close to the end.

The port city of Baccalà, returned to be once again illuminated by the hot southern sun. Which was not as warm as it used to be in the summer, for now it grew weaker as the winter approached quickly, even so, it was still warm, hot if not some days.

In the City of the Golden Towers, inside the palace, the Nilfgaardian Emperor, Fergus var Emreis, was watching it as well, through some kind of a telescope, with his mage and advisors next to him.

'Did the witcher end the contract ?' asked the emperor, while he kept on observing the phenomenon.

'We didn't receive any confirmation, yet. It is expected to arrive soon, Your Imperial Majesty.', answered one of his advisors.

'Very well...' responded the Nilfgaardian Emperor, leaving the telescope, going towards his desk.

'Forgive my intrusion, Your Imperial Majesty, but, Is it safe to rely on a man such as he, on such an important matter...'. Asked one advisor, as the other three, seemed very curious about what will the head of the state say.

'He is expendable and a professional on such matters, and that is enough said, don't you agree ?' said Fergus var Emreis, as the eyes of the advisor that asked went down, fast, tensing his jaw muscles. While the Emperor sat straight, with his hands behind his back, near his desk, looking out the window, as the light of the sun returned to his great empire.

'I-', began the advisor, who planned to apologize, but, was cut short by one of the other advisors to his right. Who's hand quickly touched his shoulder, near his neck while shaking his head, with a somber look on his face. That might've told the advisor, 'Don't bother, just don't.'. He then took him out of the chamber.

'I never want to see him here again.', said the Emperor, while the other two that remained in the room, moved their heads in agreement.

The contract was given to a witcher from the School of the Viper, more exactly, Letho of Gulet, he brought in Ayanna of Liddertal and Gerd of Skellige. The contract was on a noble man, that at the moment of the eclipse was in the port city of Baccalà, he was a member of the conspirators and planned a move against Fergus var Emreis. Who considered that the House of Emreis and Fergus himself, were unworthy to lead the empire. This action will later have consequences for the emperor, as the one known for now as The Usurper, will murder and overthrow Fergus var Emreis in 1233. The Usurper will be executed later by Fergus's son, Emhyr var Emreis in 1257.

The whole cave contained one room, separated by bookshelves, books that presented lectures from philosophy to history to sixth century literature, even some about elven architecture and magical runes. Beyond it on the wall left from it, stood two cabinets, one contained cutlery and the other from mugs to bowls to glasses, next to them few kegs of wine probably. As further on the opposite wall from the bookshelves was placed a table, on which sat a several slices of boar meat, above which hanged from the ceiling on a string some spices, and to the wall on the right was the fire place, upon which was placed a pot, that contained stew.

On the same wall to the right were three beds, between the first and the second, Lona was laying. Attempting to stand up, while near the wall in the opposite direction was her husband

Galodo, and Gerd. Who was with his left hand around the grip of his steel sword, attempting to take it out of its scabbard.

Galodo was still dizzy. Haven't moved a bit, still leaning on the wall. His face showed no different expression, only one that gave the scent of a tired man, that either accepted his death or didn't care anymore, which to Gerd was pretty much the same.

A hideous figure had risen from among the fog clouds now standing upon the lands of Redania. The creature made a strange cry, that gave a couple of crows standing on a rotten tree the instinct to scramble and leave the haze filled swamp. Further from the figure another two appeared, his brethren. They were ready to hunt, ready to kill, already caught the scent of blood in the air. The mist upon the land started to shift and move as the three creatures of the dark raced within it, towards the main road. Through the mist, they smelled and felt the taste of blood on their tongues, ready to devour whatever caught their undivided attention. They were hunters...

The main path to the city of Novigrad had on each side woods, from among them the thick fog began to drain on the main road, it had many more miles until it would clear away from the forest and get on the barren hills and plains.

As the mist was flowing upon the road, not far, the sound of wooden wheels hitting the puddles of mud and water could be heard, grunts of a horse and soon after, a loud neighing. The carriage suddenly increased its speed, now bolting quite fast across the road while the carriage driver tried but was unable to calm his horses down, then both took a hard left off the main road setting the carriage to turn and crash into a tree, as the horses ran into the thick fog that covered the forest. The man that was in the carriage was well, for he jumped right before the wooden cart hit the tree, rolling a few times through the muddy road. He stood up with a groan, accompanied by pain in his lower back, as he walked to what remained of his carriage. He stopped and watched the remains, with one hand on his forehead and another on his hip, in disbelief and dread of what happened. He didn't know what made his horses do what they just did. But, as he thought to look if he could salvage something, his eyes wondered in the direction his horses headed. As he approached the other side of the wrecked carriage, he crouched near it, checking for salvageable wares. Not long after, a shiver traveled his spine, as he bolted up. While from within the fog, deep into the woods, an ear scratching roar was heard, followed by a sharp neigh. As any other individual found in such a position, he nimbly tracked back towards the road, while looking in all directions as he swilled down some spit. Afterwards, quickly building up his steps to running. Hoping to reach the clearance before whatever got his horse would get him too. But, he didn't run much. For one of the mist travelers already got his scent, and with a growl from within the woods the beast blasted out on to the muddy road, sliding from the left side to the right. Raising its head up, staring down the fleeing man. Snarled once more, then began to sprint towards the human, soon expected to become its prey.

As it chased the human, the beast released a snort, each time it plunged its front legs into the muddy road. Blowing air through its large nostrils, purring. As from its sharp teeth, lines of saliva were flowing down its chin and neck, as the monstrous creature was running. All the while it got closer and closer to the human, then suddenly it let out a deep growl. While the driver, kept running as the creature was on his tail...

Within the woods, some of the mist moved on the road as the man advanced. And not a moment later another one like the beast behind him jumped from the woods in front of him, standing in the middle of the road, shivering and purling. With it's back arched in a monstrous position, so that it's spine vertebrae were almost puncturing through the veiny, rotten like skin. Then it screamed so loud that the man instantly stopped running, with his fists slowly opening as he knew that there was no more hope for him, that he'll die in this forgotten forest, eaten by those two creatures.

The two monsters got closer to him, one behind and another in front of him. Confident that he had no escape, until his eyes sauntered to his left. With a gasp and thought he could climb in a tree, and the creature couldn't possibly climb too. So, he ran for the tree. Lighting fast, he believed, for that was his only power, belief.

It didn't last long, for the mist among the woods moved again towards him so fast that he had no time to react nor do anything. The human did nothing, for he couldn't do anything. Just as he blinked, another of those beasts struck him in the chest with it's head, sending him back in the middle of the road. He fell like a rock in the mud, on his back and as he opened his eyes he saw the creature that hit him was now above him, it's saliva leaking on his trousers, purling while slowly unclenching it's sharp teeth, ready to bite off his head.

At that moment the other two came closer, one of them howled, as if he congratulated his brethren.

From within the trees it came. Fast, with a silver tip shining as it left the darkness of the woods. It's tail made of steel. Traveling through the mist, piercing it, as then, with a whistle. It stopped in the monster's femur. Which responded with a high-pitched scream and backed away from the man standing in the middle of the road.

Then another arrow followed. This one, the beast escaped, then growled and jumped into the mist. A deep thump followed, as swift wind rushed out, making a hole into the mist and shook the nearby trees, as if something had blown up. Then, the beast flew out from between the woods on the other side of the road, hitting the trees hard, braking a few branches. Then, the other two went in and soon both got out, one of them hit and broke a small tree and stopped on the path scratching the muddy road with it's claws and the other ran out burning, as finally the one that sent the arrow revealed himself. He was a witcher, holding a silver sword with magical runes on it, he drove the blade to the cranium of the burning creature. For then the one that got out first ran towards him, sliding it's claws along his sword then it was blown away by a spell of wind. After that with a pirouette the monster slayer cut the beast in two equal halves and then set his eyes on the only one left. The shivering shape of the creature charged towards him, as saliva was flowing out of it's mouth and as soon as it reached the witcher, it jumped trying to slash him across his chest. He escaped by rolling left and as the beast passed him, he quickly turned, with his sword in both hands and slashed the beast's belly open. It's guts slid out, as the beast fell on the ground, a horrible stench came from it's insides that were now laying on the road, clawing it's paws into the mud, groaning like.

'Damn ghouls...!', said Gerd as he put his sword through it's skull, ending the beast.

Then the witcher went to check on the man, to see if he was injured.

'Are you alright ?', asked the witcher, helping the man stand up.

'I'm fine. But only due to you. Thank you.', responded the man.

'Where were you going ?', asked Gerd.

'Novigrad, I was to deliver what I had, and pick up a package and deliver it to Oxenfurt.'

'I see...', began Gerd, 'Where to now ?'.

'Well. There's a village on the other side of this forest. So, I guess there.', responded the carriage driver.

'Good, I'm heading there too.', replied Gerd, as the man he just saved, nodded his head.

'I'm Gerard by the way...', said the man.

'Gerd, witcher.', he responded, while the two were heading out of the forest towards the nearest village.

The witcher's blade was now completely out of the scabbard, and Gerd slowly pointed it to the floor, as he went closer to Galodo.

As from behind...

'Leave him be !', screamed Lona, holding an axe, that she just swung past the witcher's shoulder, then she stopped in front of her husband, Galodo.

'He, should've leaved those people in Spalla...', said the witcher.

'He did what he had to do, for us. To protect his family. To protect me.', responded Lona, as Galodo's hand went to her shoulder.

'It's alright, Lona, leave...', whispered Galodo.

'No !' quickly replied Lona, as she looked her husband in the eyes, over her shoulder.

'He won't stop, he has a contract on my head.', continued Galodo.

'No...', she said again, then looked at Gerd, 'He did what he had to do...', as her voice started to break at the end of the sentence and her hands began to tremble.

'So do I...', said Gerd with a somber tone, as he clamped his fingers around the grip of his steel sword.

Strangest Sights

.VIII. Strangest Sights.

'Fuck...!', cursed one of the men sitting at a table outside the Inn.

'What ?', replied the one sitting on his left.

'Is that the witcher's horse ?', asked another, sitting on the right.

'I think...!', responded the one that spoke first.

'Well, it ate Aiona's herbs.', said the one on the left.

While the one on the right started to laugh.

'It almost ate my hat earlier. Crazy horse. Tried to get it back, it started neighing and got up on it's hind legs...!', said the one on the left.

The laughing continued.

'When do you think he'll come back ?', asked the one on the right.

'Don't know, for he didn't mention...!', responded the one in the middle. Owner of the town's stables. Scratching the back of his head. 'Why ?'.

'Think...It's a nice horse. We could sell it.', said the one on the right.

'I don't want to be the one who messes with him.', replied the stable owner.

'Didn't you say yesterday that you need some coin for the wedding of your niece ?', asked the one on the left.

'I did. But, I won't sell a witcher's horse, that's suicide...!', responded the stable owner.

'He's not that dumb. We have guards here. He won't dare mess with them. I heard that they pretend that what they do is so dangerous, but in truth, anyone could do it. Ha ! I could kill a damn ghoul and so could you. We just pay him coin to get rid of something we can take care of ourselves...Ptooeey.', spat the peasant on the right. Nasty, with a balding head, a patchy beard, thick black eyebrows and green eyes similar to a frog, a crooked nose and thin lips.

'How much do you think we can get for it...!', whispered the stable owner to the one on the right, leaning towards him. While the one on the left, smiled.

'A few hundreds. It's a beautiful Skelligan mare.', responded the one on the right, standing up.

'Aren't they feral ?', asked the one on the left, then drank from his tankard.

'They are, but-', answered the one on the right.

'Then, how do you plan to take it to Novigrad and sell it when it is like...that.', replied the stable owner, as he looked at the horse which jumped a fence and went inside a small garden.

'Hm...We could put it to sleep. Maya knows a several herbs that might just do that.', replied the one on the right, satisfied with his plan so far.

Fate had it that Galodo's life will end at the blade of the witcher one day. But, fate knows what it knows. Gerd on the other hand, felt that there was something more to it than what meets the eye...

But he didn't get the chance to ask about anything because around five or six of Galodo's men arrived at the hideout. And obviously noticed the front door being well... 'missing'. They hurried to see what happened.

One remained behind on a hill, an archer, half-elf, to oversee the entrance. While the others advanced carefully towards the door. Two on each side.

Gerd at that moment stepped back from the couple and stopped in front of the door. Being noticed by the archer who gave a signal to the ones heading to the entrance that he saw something and that he will shoot.

The witcher heard the steps of the men approaching, one of them was nervous, Gerd heard his heavy breath first. Then the archer shot one of his arrows, that passed across Gerd's face, stopping in the bookshelves. After that not a second later, the ones approaching the door quickened their steps, and just as the first entered, Gerd used his Aard sign and pushed him out. He managed to make a step toward Galodo and Lona, before three more entered.

'Tsk. Damnit...!', murmured Gerd as the three men attacked him, while Lona and Galodo escaped from the cave...

Gerd killed the men fast and stepped out of the cave, watching as Galodo was disappearing beyond the hump of the hill. He saw the archer run in the opposite direction, then called his mare and followed them on a narrow path that led uphill through a sparse forest, then after a bit it descended into an opening as further down everything turned into sand.

From the top of that hill. Gerd saw a Zerrikanian camp, laying at the foothills, flying their red linen banners that had on them a black dragon figure, that was stretching it's wings from one side to the other. The camp contained a dozen or so tents made of red cloth.

A quite large settlement, that seemed armed to the teeth, probably with long sabers, bows, lances and long axes. Trying to infiltrate would result in a unavoidable death, even for a witcher.

Gerd could take on many foes at once, but not that many. For the number of those in the camp was above fifty, even if Zerrikanians don't wear chest plates and gauntlets or steel plated trousers or any kind of footwear sometimes, except for sandals. They are masters with

a sword in hand or a simple bow with one arrow in their quiver. Usually their most dominant gender is female, known to be the most respected and of the highest influence, those are also their most feared warriors.

They are customarily wearing a piece of yellow, orange or red cloth, around their neck and shoulders, longer on one side than the other. Sometimes wearing it around their heads, as a veil or a hood. Some wore pelts of exotic animals like cheetahs, panthers or lions, those are known to be important figures, alike politicians, respected warriors and hunters. The warriors, as they were commonly females, wore leather straps that came down from their shoulders around their chest with sometimes cloth of red or orange color, as lower would wear an ornamented belt that would hold another garment made of cloth that would be at least knee-length, and lower just the sandals made from leather. Some were walking even on the battlefield barefoot. The warriors or hunters wore their hair tied in a ponytail or a loop of hair or had it shaved. They also had face paint, near the eyes, the temples of the head, forehead or cheeks. Most of them had tattoos around their hands, legs, some all over their bodies even faces. They carried their weapons on their back, sometimes having at least two knives or poisoned darts and a pipe on the back of their leather belt. The men wore nothing on the top part of their bodies beside a hood, and a leather strap that held the weapons on their back, usually a shield, axe or a lance. Lower a yellow kilt as the women, knee-length and most of them were shoeless.

Whatever they were doing this close to the Blue Mountains, it had to be something that involved Galodo. They rarely came this close to the northern kingdoms in the known written history, maybe it was some lord from those lands that had this business with Galodo. It was perhaps payment day for the mercenary, or something else. Whatever it was, Gerd had no way of finding out very soon.

Gerd made camp at the top of the hill, from where he could observe the Zerrikanian camp. The weather on this side of the Blue Mountains, respectively this south became a problem for his ursine armor, that he took off, leaving on only his trousers and boots. The time he watched the camp he noticed only that Galodo had been taken to a tent in the middle of the camp and since then he saw not one man go back or get out of that tent. The only thing he saw were buffed tattooed women that walked around the camp, besides that nothing else told him anything interesting, as he sat on a rock looking down hill, with a canteen containing water that he drank from.

While he was spying on the camp, he heard foot steps from behind. He quickly turned, only to see a woman, patting his mare on the neck, then placed her palm on it's muzzle.

When he got up, she quickly reached for her knife. Gerd's swords were near the horse's saddle, so he had no weapon. He lifted his arms showing his hands, taking a couple of steps back, as he knew that if she wanted to attack, she would've by now.

'Maethann ?', she said, while pointing at Gerd's medallion.

Gerd did not react nor said anything back, she then placed her index finger to her chin, thinking of something.

'How do you say it... B-E-A-R... Bear ?', she resumed, 'Your medallion...!'

He blinked, clearing his throat. 'Ahem. Yes. Bear...', answered Gerd, confused of what were her intentions.

'I just saw you watching the camp. So, I thought to...visit ? Yes, visit you.'

'Why ?', asked Gerd, slowly lowering his hands.

'I was curious.', she answered, still holding the handle of her knife.

'Mhm...', Gerd murmured.

'We don't see someone of your kind everyday.', she said, measuring Gerd, head to toe.

'How so ?'.

'You are a witcher. There aren't many of you in these parts.'

'I am.', answered Gerd, while she let go of the knife's handle.

'When I first saw you from afar I thought you were a bandit. Or who knows what else, but when I came closer I noticed your medallion. And your mare...she's so beautiful. You take good care of her from what I see.', she continued, placing her hand on it's muzzle again. 'Does she have a name ?'.

'No.'

'Shame, but she's still young, so you could still give her one...', she said, while placing her both hands above the mare's muzzle, touching it's forehead to hers.

'What is your name ? Mine is Tara.', she said, taking a few steps towards him.

'Gerd.'

'What do you actually spy, Gerd ?'.

'A man and a woman were brought to your camp recently...'

'The mús ?', she asked, approaching.

'The what ?',

'Tsk. Mouse, I think...'

'That's what you call him ?',

'Most of the time. Mostly our chief...'

'The middle tent ?', Gerd asked.

'Hmm...yes. You don't plan something like getting in there do you ?'.

'Not that stupid.'

'Thought so.', she responded, placing her hands on her belt.

'How is it that you know the northern realms tongue ?'.

'Had a professor in the town I grew up. He taught it to me when I was little. He gave me books and maps that I read...'

'He's dead now ?', Gerd asked, while the woman nodded. 'Was his name Walt Von Svarnst ?'.

'Yes. You knew him ?'.

'A bit...'

She was quite charming, beautiful, a warm brown skin, dark haired, with chestnut colored eyes. Next to her right one on her cheek a bit to the right she had a beauty spot. A feminine narrow nose dropping straight down from her forehead. Lower a square jaw and a pair of beautiful, opulent lips. She was quite tall, fit. As her abdomen muscles were very well defined, like the rest of her body. Thin, but defined. Wearing a dark-red piece of cloth that covered her chest, an ornamented belt that sat around her hips with a knife on its left side and another piece of red cloth, knees long, and she wore leather sandals.

Gerd then sat down on his rock, looking at the camp.

'You know that man ?', she asked, while she sat next to Gerd.

'You could say that...'

'What do you want with him ?'.

'I want him dead.', responded Gerd, as the zerrikanian woman, looked at him for a bit then looked back at the camp.

'You won't kill him very soon then. He is to go to our village, to be sentenced.'.

'You are here to escort him ?'.

'More like assure his presence...'

'So, he has to go.'.

'He does. Or his fate will be decapitation, without a trial. And he still has to pay his debt.'.

'What debt ?'.

'He needed help some time ago. And he received help, as he promised he is good to repay it in full...', she said, then turned to Gerd. 'What is your plan ?'.

'To follow.'.

'Hah. Follow us to Zerrikania ? Are you mad ? Do you need him dead so bad ?'.

'I do. I took a contract on his head and I have in mind to finish it.'.

'I have to appreciate your commitment. Still, I don't think it is a good plan following us, when there is a better way.'.

'Which is ?'.

'You could join us.'.

'Meaning ?'

'I help you, you help me. Get it ?'

'I do. What do you need help with ?'.

'Nothing, for now. You'll know when. It will allow you to enter the camp. And once the debt is paid, you can kill The Mouse.'.

Gerd did not know what to say, for he did not know her true intention. Was it kindness or deception. Whatever it was, it gave him access to the camp and a safe passage to Zerrikania. He was grateful he found someone that spoke his tongue. A lot more then he had before she appeared.

'Why would you help me ?', he asked.

'Why not ? You seem to want him dead as much as me.'.

'Why would you want him dead ?'.

'As I said previously, he has this debt...', she said standing up, watching the camp's middle tent. 'He paid most of it, but grew restless when he realized he couldn't pay it full. He made a mistake that implied taking something that wasn't his. And through all that, innocent lives had been taken. Somehow he managed to escape us then, and to this day his debt is still unpaid. Making matters worse, several people east of here want him punished for his deeds. Now he will face the consequences of his actions...'. She tensed her jaw, then turned to Gerd. 'Now, come. Let's go to the camp, you'll have to meet the chief. She's...nice.'.

'That bad ?'.

'Not all the time, she's just moody nowadays.'.

Gerd and his new friend Tara, had made a deal that gave the witcher a way to be close to his target, Galodo Frock. And when the time comes he would have to pay the debt he owes to her.

Gerd took his belongings and went to saddle his horse, while Tara awaited him.

'What were you talking about?', said Gerd walking out of the Inn, introducing himself into the discussion the three peasants had.

'Look who's back.', said the man standing on the right with a ridiculing tone. 'The coin grabber. Did you do your precious trade, witcher?'

'As a matter of fact, yes. I did.', Gerd answered approaching the table.

'Hah ! Where's your proof then?', asked the peasant, having a dumb expression on his face.

'Here.', responded Gerd, as he threw a bag on the table. From which the heads of two ghouls slid out, in front of the peasants.

The other two peasants jump from their seats, while the one on the right took a few steps back.

'I- see. Who's this?', the peasant on the right resumed.

'Gerard. The witcher saved me from these beasts...', responded the man, that walked out of the Inn a few moments ago and stopped on the witcher's left side.

'Sure he did.', scoffed the peasant. 'You're going to get your coin, I presume.'

'I think so. Yes. Is there a problem?', asked Gerd, taking two steps towards the peasant.

'Yes- You cunt ! I say you don't need the coin or your horse anymore.', the peasant lashed out.

'Is that so?'

'Y- Yes ! You fuckin' freak ! Now, leave the village and never return ! Or I-'

'You, what?', interrupted Gerd, adopting a grave tone.

'Lars, I don't think-', spoke the man left of the stable owner.

'Shut it Shev ! it is time their kind fuck off from this land.'

'You plan to do that yourself?', added Gerd.

'What !? Surprised ? You heard me, I-'

'You, won't do anything !', grunted Gerd, staring at Lars. Who's face frowned, while his right hand wrapped as quick as he could around the knife he held on his belt. With which he attempted to stab Gerd in the neck. His arm suddenly stopped right before puncturing the neck, the tip pressing on the witcher's beard. Caught by the witcher, Lars pushed as much as he could, but his hand didn't move any further. He sighed. 'As I said. Nothing...', continued Gerd. As he grabbed and twisted the man's arm, making it click and crack, as the peasant screamed, dropping the knife. Then Gerd's right hand clutched around Lars's neck, lifting him up, then thrown him into a few crates near the door of the Inn. He then took his hunting knife, and pointed the blade on the peasant's neck. 'Now. I could kill you, right now. But then, I

might have to butcher the whole village afterwards.', Lars frog alike eyes, quickly locked on two armed men, which came to see what had happened. But as soon as they saw the witcher, they stopped and leaned on the other side of the fence. Without any intention to intervene. 'As it seems, none will bother raising a finger to help you. For, none of them are idiots. But, you are. I'd wager they don't care if you live or die. As not even one of them give a shit about a good-of-nothing-drunken-fool like you. I could just slit your throat right here and I'd be doing them a favor. But, the death of a halfwit such as you, doesn't require a witcher's hand in it. Folk usually hang thieves alike you.'. Blood started to slid down the peasant's neck, followed by the smell of piss. Gerd then moved the knife's blade away from Lars's neck, driving it in his leg. 'But. I hope you learned something important today.', said Gerd, taking the knife out of Lars's leg. Wiping the blade on the man's shirt.

He then walked to the table, where he put the heads of the ghouls back in the bag, and looked at the other two peasants.

'You two want to join him ?', Gerd asked, while the man named Shev, moved his head in disagreement. 'Now. This man needs a horse. You'll bring him one. For free.', continued Gerd, looking at the stable owner.

'Right away, master.', said the stable owner, then hurried to the stables to get Gerard his horse.

Afterwards, he addressed his friend. 'Wait here while I go take my coin.'.

'Alright.', replied Gerard, waiting for the stable owner to bring him a horse.

Gerd walked to a hut not far from the stables, where a man called Ian lived. He was the one that posted a notice about a ghoule problem in the forest near the main road. Gerd found there a ghoule nest, and killed around a dozen of them. Ian, the one that posted the contract didn't tell him how many of them would be, though he knew that they were many. Gerd noticed that he was lying about something when he took the contract. Thus, now he will go and ask for more coin, for what the contract had, was fifty-four crowns.

'Ian.', said Gerd as he entered the door of the man's hut.

'You killed them ?', the man responded, as he quickly stepped in the main chamber, from a room where his wife and children were.

'I did. All twenty-four of them...!', the witcher snarled, throwing the bag containing the ghoule's heads to the peasant's feet.

The man moved his eyes away from the witcher's. Looking at the bag Gerd had thrown in front of him.

'I-'.

'You said they were not many...!'.

'But-'

'No.', Gerd interrupted, approaching Ian. 'You knew how many. Didn't you ?'.

'I-'

'You did.', grunted the witcher.

'I did...'

'Good. Now you pay me, eighty crowns.'

'But-'

'What did I say ?'.

'I have children. I-I need to clothe them. To feed them. Master, you must understand-'

'No.', the witcher grunted. 'I don't want to understand. For what I want, is my payment. You haven't told me that there would be a dozen of them. I could've leave them be. So that, tomorrow, or the day after, most of them would've gotten here. And tear the whole lot of you, and your children to pieces. But, I didn't. I did what my kind are supposed to do. So, pay up.'

'Alright, alright...', responded the man, taking a handful of coins from a pouch he took out of a cupboard. 'Here...'

'Good. Farewell.', Gerd said, while taking the pouch from the peasant's hand.

Gerd, got out of Ian's hut, and went back to the stables. Where he grabbed the saddle and put it on his horse, then resumed his way to Novigrad, accompanied by Gerard. Where he had to find a ship bound for the Isles of Skellige.

Contentment

.IX. Contentment.

As the sun began to descend from its previous position in the afternoon, rapidly heading west, ready to hide itself beyond the reddish rocky peaks of the Blue Mountains. Gerd and the zerrikanian woman were heading towards the camp.

'So, why do you wear such thick armor and clothes ?', she asked, looking at the armor Gerd carried on his saddle.

'Besides, the additional protection. There's a heavy winter northwest of here...!'

'I almost forgot about your weather being colder this time of the year. Has there been snow ?'.

'Mhm. There is heaps of it west.'.

'It must be a beautiful scenery. I for one haven't seen snow since Walt and I traveled North. And that was many years ago. I wish I could see it again.'.

'It's just frozen water, nothing special about it-', Gerd began then paused with a sigh. 'But, I guess if one get's used to it, one tends to omit the beauty it can bear.', he resumed.

'It must be so. I vaguely recall the way Walt described to me a day of winter in the west. Though I remember it seemed almost magical...!'

Gerd softly smiled. 'He always liked to dramatize his tales. He did like to dabble in writing and poetry, among many other things. And those left aside, you were a child.', the witcher continued, as they were steadily making their way towards the Zerrikanian encampment. 'You don't have to answer, but, how did he fare in his last few years ?'.

'Not very differently from his previous. He taught others, myself included. He did a lot of exploration, even spent several of his last years amongst the elves of Yolwelkairr. He described those years as the most calm and content he's ever had.'.

Gerd chuckled. 'He said being plucked from the mundane, has to always offer one a sense of adventure. Hence why he traveled east to begin with.'.

'I did hear him say that !', Tara said, laughing. 'How long did you two know each other ?'.

'Decades...!'

'Really ? I can't even begin to imagine him in his younger years. How was he ?'.

'Odd, kind and daft at times. A good friend in others. We've spent a lot of time together debating, especially in his years as professor at Oxenfurt, as that's when he fell into countless

of dense tomes regarding the magical arts, history, the Conjunction of the Spheres and the few works that mention Zerrikania and Haakland...'.

'You know, he did mention several times those years he spent as a professor...', she replied. 'Though, he did not color them as being his best...'.

'They weren't. He struggled for a while. Mostly irked by his colleagues, and their works. I recall one time we met at the local tavern and he was quite furious, and when I asked why, he replied: 'This university's most accomplished individuals are but a bunch of halfwits with the fledgling minds of a new born, an absurd view of the current politic climate, spineless and whom would plagiarize other works rather than conduct their own experiments and research. And above all else, are blinded by an utter lack of perspective !'. After that he started pondering over the idea of leaving the university, as he said that the sheer amount of incompetence he found there, might succeed in driving him mad.'.

'That does sound so much like him...', Tara replied, then turned to Gerd. 'How did you two meet ?'.

'Quite strangely, if I remember it correctly. It was in Skellige, at an Inn, in a clear day of winter. He was fairly young back then. He was seated at a table in the middle of the inn, playing cards. He bet his estate, and I planned to play him but we ended up talking. I asked about it and he told me the estate was haunted and that he wanted to get rid of it. He was concerned that his wife will find out that he spend a load of coin on the estate and divorce him. I somehow convinced him to not run away and return to his wife.', Gerd replied as the two were almost at the camp.

'How about the estate, was it truly haunted ?'.

'More of a complicated curse that bound few specters to the manor...'.

'What about his wife ?', she asked, quite fascinated about the venturous past of her teacher.

'The next time I saw him it was in Novigrad. As he said, I had only to ask for him and people would point me in his direction. That was a few years later, he and his wife separated a year before. He told me it was due some issues that developed between them. Issues he couldn't solve, nor did he possessed the tools required.'.

'That must have been some time ago. For he told me he was a widower for some decades, back when I was little.', she began, then turned to Gerd with a smile. 'I'm glad we met, witcher. And I am eager to hear more tales about you and my tutor's past ventures. He never mentioned you by name, though he had several references and passages through his journal regarding an old friend, a witcher, he had back west. Through several of those passages, he was mostly concerned about your welfare. So, I imagine it's only fair for you to wonder of how he fared in his final years. It must be a relief to hear so, and I can only wish he were here to know you're in good health, so he could be at ease as well. Considering, that the last you must've seen of him, had to be a long time ago...'.

'It was. I'd say about twenty years or so, I guess...', Gerd said, while Tara caressed the neck of her horse. 'About the same as your age...'.

'So, a long time...', she replied, then turned to the witcher. 'How old are you ?'.

Gerd chuckled, for he barely believed his age himself. 'Quite old...!'

'I'd say you are about...Twice my age ?'.

'Add the same amount once more and you're almost there.'.

'That is old...', she said, while Gerd responded with a slight smile.

'Where's Tara ?', asked a woman in Elder Speech. Tattooed from head to toes in strange symbols. 'Biua ! Have you seen Tara ?'.

The woman raised her shoulders, looking for someone to ask as well.

'Why do you need her ?', asked Biua, turning back at her chief.

'Haven't seen her since we brought The Mouse in the camp...!'

'Worried ?', questioned Biua, with a ridiculing tone.

'Don't start...!'

'Your no fun today...!'

'I just have no time to play your dumb game. So has anyone seen her-'.

'There she is ! But, who's that ?', replied another woman, near Biua. Pointing toward the path that came down from the hill, towards the camp.

'Did she capture him ?', asked Biua.

'She didn't.', the chief responded. 'Go tell Maa to tell Tara to bring him to my tent.'.

'Sure.'.

'Tara.', said the woman guarding the entrance to the camp. Tall, bald, but good looking.

'Maa.', replied Tara passing by her.

'Get the stranger to Veya's tent.', continued Maa, while staring at Gerd.

'Got it.', responded Tara, taking Gerd's horse inside the camp.

'No weapons.', continued Maa. Stopping Gerd with her bulked right arm that she raised in front of him. Gerd, as requested, gave her his swords, crossbow and knife, while his mare was taken by two women. He then continued following Tara.

'They are taking her where our horses are. Don't worry.'.

After a short walk through the camp, they arrived at the chief's tent, Tara entered first. Gerd waited outside for a while, until Tara told him to enter.

The inside of the tent was decorated with the chief's weapons and a couple of armor pieces that she wore in battle. Such as a set of leather boots and gauntlets, another ones made of iron or perhaps steel. While next to them was a great bow, made of hard wood and next to it a quiver filled with arrows. Not far from them was a table on which were placed two sabers, with a belt on top of them.

Some distance from them sat on a chair at another table, next to a bed made from the pelts of different animals, the chief herself. Cleaning the blade of a long sword, of northern origins. A high quality one, rare, probably dwarven made.

'Tara, leave us, I'll talk to you later.', the chief said, while Tara walked out of the tent.

'Witcher. What brings you to my camp?', said Veya, as she stood up from her chair with the sword in one hand.

'The man you brought, the one you call the mouse. I have a contract on his head.', responded Gerd, while the chief walked towards him.

'Huh. He did fail to mention you.', she said as she stopped in front of him. 'You must've gave him those bruises on his face. Glad you didn't kill him though, but don't worry. You will. As soon as his debt is paid...'

'You can guarantee that?'

'Look at me witcher. Do I look like someone that doesn't keep her word?', said Veya, with a serious tone. 'After the debt is payed, he's all yours.'

'What is this debt he has to pay?'

'You got the contract because his men butchered an entire village. Isn't that right?'

'It is.'

'He grew desperate, after a couple of our people showed up at his door, demanding payment. Thus, he did what he does best. He discovered that a gang had a stash in that village. Desperate as he was, he stumbled into something he didn't expect. During his heist, things went sour, a fight kindled. He lost most of his men, while the rest cut through everyone that stood in his way. Fortunate enough, he managed to get out of the village with the coin needed to pay the rest of his debt.'

'Tara mentioned he is to be sentenced for some crimes he committed.'

'That's right.'

'If so, how can you assure me that I get his head?'

'Very simply. If he is to be sentenced to death, I'll make sure his head ends up in a bag that you can take back west. If not, you get to obtain it yourself. Either way, you complete your

contract.', she replied extending her right arm toward the witcher. 'Do we have a deal ?'.

'We do.', he replied shaking her hand.

The sun quickly passed the peaks of the Blue Mountains, hiding beyond it as the darkness came from the east, with a crescent moon rising an hour later.

The desert of Korath was known for its strange dwellers under the massive dunes of sand, not a place you would like to spend the night.

Gerd was sitting at a table, beneath a piece of cloth wrapped on it's edges on three slim wooden poles, that was covering the table. From the position Gerd sat, he could spot between the tents, the dunes of the Korath desert.

'What are you looking at ?, asked Tara, who approached and sat on the other side of the table.

Gerd responded by nodding his head towards the dunes that sat only around five hundred meters from the camp. Tara turned on the wooden bench, looking on the same direction the witcher was.

'We are safe here. If that is your concern...!'

'It isn't. But, how will you traverse that ?'.

'We have routes. We have sent a dozen of scouts out there, to inspect the dunes.'.

'Is all of this worth it ? For one man, such as Galodo ?'.

Tara chuckled. 'I could ask you the same ?', she replied with a smile, then sighed. 'There is no danger if we follow the route. Only mistakes...!'

'Mistakes ?'.

'The scouts, make most of them, if unable to spot the diggers.'.

'Any recent ones ?'.

'None so far...!', she answered, turning back, facing Gerd again. 'Want another drink ?'.

'Why not.', responded Gerd, while Tara grabbed a bottle, that she dug out of the sand.

While the two kept on drinking and chatting, Veya got out of her tent, and walked towards the two.

'What are you two babbling about ? You opened two bottles already and failed to invite me as well ? Tsk, Tsk, that is betrayal...!', she said as she sat down at the table on the wooden bench next to Tara, then grabbed the bottle and drank straight from it. 'So, what are you two talking about ?'.

'Diggers, among other things.', answered Tara.

'Diggers. nasty creatures...!', replied Veya. Taking another sip from the bottle, moving closer to Tara. 'Why are you here ? Let's retreat...!', she continued, kissing Tara's neck, then moved her left hand between her legs.

'Not now...!', responded Tara, shoving Veya's hand away from her privates.

'What ? Are you shy because he's watching ? He could join us. What do you say-!'

'You are drunk.'.

'And that's where you draw the line ?'.

'Don't mind her.'.

'Fine. So, witcher. Do you like it here so far ?', resumed Veya, now resting her elbows on the table.

'Not complaining.'.

'How could you. We give you a safe passage to Zerrikania, food, water and women.'. She then raised from the table, grabbed the bottle and walked towards her tent, 'Have fun...!', she continued, taking another sip from the bottle.

'I should go after her. See that she won't do something dumb...!', said Tara, as she stood up then followed Veya.

Gerd sighed, 'I'm gonna get some sleep now...!', after which he got up from the bench and walked towards a small tent that Veya gave him.

Lots of thoughts went through the witcher's head before going to sleep in his small red colored tent. While his eyes began to close and sleep took him away, outside, the crescent moon was shining on the star filled sky. As on the ground, away, among the vile dunes of sand, a sand storm could be noticed taking place few kilometers inside the dead desert of Korath.

The night transcended quickly into a new day, as in the early hours of morning the sound of footsteps all around the witcher tent, horses neighing and women talking and shouting woke up Gerd. Who as soon as he got out of his tiny tent, noticed that half of the camp was taken down and loaded into wooden carts, or put on the back of camels to be carried back to the zerrikanian lands. After he stretched his muscles, the witcher joined Veya and Tara who were helping load a camel with cloth and supplies.

'Look who finally woke up...!', said Veya, with a criticizing tone, 'Slept well ?'.

'I slept just fine.', murmured Gerd.

'Come. We got a couple more of these to load and then we're off...!', said Tara.

'Right.', continued Veya. 'Come with me, witcher.'

While the witcher and the two women carried the few remaining supplies to be loaded on the back of a camel. From the desert's direction, two men walked towards what remained of the camp.

'Scouts !', shouted Maa.

The leader of the expedition, Veya, awaited them next to her horse. With one hand on her hip and the other on the handle of her sabers. Watching as the scouts approached the site of the camp, carrying news of the safest route they would have to take through the Korath Desert.

'Chief...', said the man, heavily breathing, same as the other next to him.

'Bàlt, report.', replied Veya.

The man took a deep breath, and then began to give the news to his superior.

'We saw several diggers north-east from here but they were moving east last we saw them. We sent a few more scouts, inside the desert to place markers...'

'But ?', asked Veya, as she sensed that both men seemed nervous about something.

'The sandstorm from last night, moved the eastern dunes...', Bàlt began, and paused for a bit looking at Veya, who seemed displeased with the report so far. He took another deep breath after which he resumed. 'Also...We lost contact with those inside that region, but from what we observed a few markers were still up...', then stopped, at the command of Veya who raised her hand.

'Therefore, beyond that we know absolutely nothing...', she began. 'Alright. We are going to use your men further. You two, rest for now. However, be prepared. For before we reach that region, we'll send you to scout the place.'

'Understood.', responded the man, while he and his companion went to get some food and water for their dried throats. Caused by the heat that already became a burden this early in the morning.

After an hour or so, the whole camp was loaded and ready to be moved across the desert, back home to Zerrikania. Finally Gerd and Galodo's eyes met, he a prisoner and Gerd some kind of an ally to the zerrikanians. Galodo had heard of a strange man being inside the camp, but he found out just now that the man was the witcher who wants his head in a bag. Lona, was surprised when she saw the witcher, she hoped that the zerrikanian warriors had taken care of him.

The troop began to move east later that morning. A quite long road was ahead of them, as it would take at least a week and few days to reach the end of the Korath Desert, and few more to the border of Zerrikania. However, before reaching that, they had to pass the desert. Famous for its violent sandstorms and the parasites that live in it. Some, unknown to the witcher schools in the west. Few are known actually about this area or the beasts that live in

it, as several of them have been imported from their natural habitat, west, used as trophies or put in fighting pits, or bought on the black market by desperate monarchs that were to bored for their own good. For circuses or to be put in large arenas to fight mighty knights and brave, dumb men across the Northern Kingdoms. Those have been put in few of the books at the witcher's schools.

Among those species, were the known Tse Tse flies that lay their eggs in the human body. The larvae, maturing within the host's head, and once they reach adulthood, they leave through the eye sockets. The giant spotted arachnomorphs, big enough to trap elephants in their webs and the known venomous basilisks, big, mean and dangerous.

Gerd was travelling in the back section of the troop, with Tara in front of him and a few male warriors behind.

They were getting closer and closer to the dunes, those marked the territory of the giant sand worms, nicknamed by the zerrikanians, the diggers. They looked like centipedes with certain special 'augmentations' as the mature ones have besides the larger size, a white to gray carapace and the younger ones a darker one, almost black. Not many are known to slay one, and those who are, managed to kill only young ones, as their carapaces are softer and the arrows can sometimes penetrate them. While, the adults are like steel plated, impossible to put down even with a ballista. They don't always consume their prey, if humans are to be considered prey. They feed on other creatures that live in that hellish desert. Humans are usually buried in the sand and with time as the dunes move the remains of what was once a body are revealed, later to be consumed by small insects and Tse Tse flies.

Whatever awaited them in that damned place was to be discovered. The minds of all warriors were at their highest point, reacting to the smallest breeze that moved the sand. The tension could be felt in the air, it was not a matter of the kind 'if it happens', more of when. Casualties were expected, death was something that depended on time. When and from where, that was on their mind. Gerd felt it as well, he was ready to grab his sword and cut through anything at the slightest sign of danger.

Hours passed. They were between the big dunes now. A few markers had been collected, as the troop advanced, while other scouts returned. The main issue was the region in which the sandstorm wiped the markers and moved the dunes, there was not one sign of any scouts left alive. Either the diggers entombed them, the storm or another kind of a beast. A couple more kilometers were left until the troop will reach the last marker, after that the scouts will do their best to plan another route and place more of them.

While the troop kept advancing among the dunes, on the back side of the group, Tara slowed down a bit, now going alongside Gerd.

'How is she ?', Tara asked moving her hand along the neck of Gerd's mare.

'Not tired yet. She's doing fine so far.', replied Gerd patting his mare's neck.

'Sand is not her favorite. Is it ?', said Tara, smiling.

'She is doing good. But, yes, I think so...!'

'We will stop as soon as we reach the next marker. She'll rest a bit then.'

'Good.'

'How are you ?'.

'Good.'

'I ask because you are not used to this kind of heat. I presume...'

'That's true. I'm not.'

'You'll get used to it, here...', Tara handed Gerd a piece of white cloth, 'Place it around your shoulders and head. It will shield your skin from the hot sun.'

'Thanks.', he then wrapped the piece of cloth around his shoulders.

Soon they've reached the next marker, it was now midday. The heat was almost unbearable, the sun was a continuous foe, now shining like a true fireball on the bright blue sky upon the desert. The dunes offered a bit of shade in certain places, but it was hot even there. The sand almost burned through Gerd's boots, it was like a big giant cauldron and the witcher's feet a stew, not a nice feeling, at all.

Gerd gave his mare some water and hay, while he drank and ate as well. Veya had sent two scouts to watch the route some more, observe any changes to the dunes and locate the next marker. While Tara helped Biua and Maa with some errands they received from Veya.

Not long after that, they resumed their journey. The scouts came back as the troop moved forward, towards the next marker, which as the scouts said, should be reached in almost two or three hours.

'Nice scars, witcher.', said Biua, approaching from behind.

'None of them were pleasant ones though...'

'I bet.'

'Huh.'

'A digger, south-east !', shouted Maa from behind.

'Shit, it's heading this way !?', yelled a man behind Maa.

'It seems so !', answered Tara, 'Be ready for anything...'

'Fuck. it's-', began Gerd, as he sensed the vibrations coming from beneath the sand. '-below us !'. The beast propelled out of the sand, grabbing in it's mouth the witcher's horse front legs, taking it with. As the desert crawler was entirely out of the sand, in the air, ready to plunge back inside one of the dunes with Gerd still on the saddle of his mare. He had his left foot

stuck into the stirrup. When the monster began to drop back towards the ground, Gerd grabbed his knife, and cut the leather that held the steel stirrup...

Contempt

.X. Contempt.

His eyes were closed, but the wounds he received this Yule, would from time to time still crack open and shed a drop of blood through the cloth around them on the white bed dressings.

'A nice evening don't you think ?', spoke a woman with a gentle voice.

'Mhm...', he murmured.

'Do you want to go down for supper ?'.

'Not hungry, though we could...', he responded as he turned on his right side facing his lover, while his left hand went along her waist down her hips and between her legs. She looked him in the eyes with a calm, lovely look, then as he reached her sensitive spot, they'd closed and she slowly turned on her back, while her lover grabbed her lower lip between his. As his hand was still between her legs she clinched her fingers, grabbing the pillow next to her, arching her back, while the witcher moved down on her, with kisses down her neck, chest, abdomen, until he reached the place his hand was at, still playing, as she was moaning with undoubtful pleasure.

Few steps from the bed the fire place was lit, the wood was cracking and creaking as it turned into ashes and it lighted the room through the iron grates in front of it, who's shadows as the flames, were shivering.

The witcher's room, had one large set of windows and beyond it a small balcony, looking out through the blizzard, down the hill as it reached the shores of the restless sea.

It was winter again on the Northern lands, Gerd, as he did every year, came back to the isles to spend the winter there and also to visit his lover at that long passed time. Vera, who as him in the winter came from the continent back to the isles to spend the cold winter with him.

Time was all that the two cared not about, as they kept on pleasuring each other every time they desired to.

Later that evening...

'So, how much did the last contract paid ?'.

'Hrgh...Two hundred and fifty orens...', he groaned as he got up the bed's side and walked to the fire place to throw some more wood on it. 'I was lucky I got that much...', he continued as he walked to the other side of the room.

'I guess...', she responded. She was laying on the side of the bed, with her lower half covered by a thick blanket. On her right side, her left arm covered her breasts while the other was

beneath her head as she was watching Gerd as he was throwing the chopped pieces of wood in the fire.

'You still don't want to go have supper ? I kinda do...how about you joining me ?'.

'Alright, I might go get some firewood as well.'.

'Great.', she responded and quickly got out of bed, put on her underwear and some clothes. 'I will see you down.'.

'Sure.', responded Gerd, as he was tossing some more wood in the fire.

That winter only Gerd, Vera, Junod, Neena and the old witcher Mousar were present at the keep. Ksander had been away that winter, on the path and on some other places, he only returned for a few weeks in the middle of summer, then came back to the keep in the winter of next year.

Junod of Belhaven was a young witcher at that time, in his late twenties, he came to the keep of the School of the Bear every year. He was a tall, jet-black haired, which he kept short, shaven on the sides, longer on top and he wore a beard at the time. He was one of the last witchers to come out of the last Trail of the Grasses. A very few children survived that one, and he was among the lucky ones to do it.

Neena and Mousar, were as always the two elders present at the keep, wise and old.

The supper had been a rich one, from food to alcohol to the amusing and wisdom filled tales told by Mousar, as the young souls around the table laughed and had a good time. After the eating and drinking ended, Gerd and Junod shared some of their stories too. Gerd told a funny encounter he had with a herbalist in Metinna, who hired him to find a special herb for his mule special diet and of his contract in Vengerberg that almost killed him. While Junod told one about his latest contract in Velen, that he had on a succubus.

The evening turned quickly into a night, past midnight, when only Gerd and Junod were left around the table. On which a few empty bottles of ale and tankards were present, while the two were playing a game of cards.

'That contract sort of opened my eyes. I mean the woman there...Were so beautiful. Cintrian brothels are glorious...'

'You start to sound just like Ksander.'.

'Hmm. Bad thing, that he didn't join us this year...', Junod replied, looking at his cards. 'But, I didn't go there for the usual activities men partake in, I had a contract...'

'So, about that succubus contract you mentioned earlier...'

'I didn't fuck her. If that is what you are curious of.'.

'Why not ? Don't like women with hoofs and antlers ? She invited you to-'.

'I just wasn't thinking with my cock, that's all.'

'Ksander would say that is a bad way to approach such situation. I say it's good that you didn't kill her.'

'Yet, I still think I should've...'

'You did the right thing. I mean she just wanted some company, she didn't kill the men she slept with...'

'No she didn't. But she kept them as...toys.'

'But, you convinced her to let them go, so, it's a well done job.'

'Maybe...Fuck ! Let's just stop playing, you'll take all my coin if we keep going...'

'Yes, I wanted to mention that.', began Gerd, laying his cards on the table, 'Sooner or later...'

'What ?!', began Junod, as he looked at the hand of cards Gerd had. 'I would've beat you this time !', he then angrily took a drink from his tankard, 'Empty, of course...'

'You said, let's stop...', continued Gerd, then he too reached for his tankard. 'Empty to, well, then a nap it is. Night.', he got up his chair, grabbed his cards and the coin he won, then walked towards the stairs.

'Good night...', responded Junod, while he did the same.

Gerd went upstairs, to his room, where Vera retired a couple hours ago. He entered the room, took off his clothes and put himself to bed.

'Nice of you to come...'

'Mhm.', he murmured, with his face buried in the pillow.

'Really thought you'd sleep with Junod tonight.'

'Hmm...', he responded murmuring.

She said nothing else. He thought that she went back to sleep, odd as she liked to always have the last word in such matters, so Gerd turned his head, resting it on his right side.

'Vera, I...'

The fuss of the flames intensified, the sound of it snarling possessed the room, suddenly through his closed eyes lids, Gerd noticed the room lighting up, and the sound of the flames seemed to be right next to him. He opened his eyes and lifted himself up, turned around only to see a body surrounded by the flames in a puddle of blood.

'What the- Vera ! Fuck ! Vera !', he quickly jumped out of the bed, through the flames and stopped next to her body. Lifted his hands and looked at them, then fell on his knees, reaching

for her lifeless figure. Holding her to his chest, all the while the chamber was being devoured by flames.

Touching his forehead to hers as the sound of flames became insupportable, it was roaring with such ferocity that it almost induced the feeling of it burning, the scent of smoke and burned skin. However, soon, Gerd realized that it was all a dream. The only thing that could hurt more was going through it again. Through the good side of it then the bad. It all had been so real, so life like, everything almost as it was back into those times. Long times ago, decades, forgotten almost. Old unhealed wounds, indeed.

Gerd quickly grabbed with his right hand the side of the bed he was on, he then continued with a deep growl. Then, he woke up and began to mutter.

From across the room, Gerd heard the creaks of the wooden planks accompanied by a couple of light steps, heading toward him.

'You're awake, good...', said an unknown man, in a foreign accent, stepping out of the shadows in the light of the flickering candles standing on the nightstand next to the bed Gerd was lying on. 'I have a job for you...!'

Whispers of Silence

.XI. Whispers of Silence.

'Down, at the center of it all, we are our worst foe...'

The front side of the troop began to run, as soon as the beast burst out of the sand.

As for Gerd, he fell from quite a height, between two dunes, rolling to the bottom of them, while the digger went under the sand again. The witcher had lost conscience from the impact with the sand, laying, half buried.

When he regain consciousness, it was close to sunset, grunting as he dug himself out of the sand. Gladly, he had his swords on his back, but, he lost his knife, crossbow, armor, horse and the people who knew how to navigate the damned desert. So, he was on his own, as always.

As soon as he revised his plan and the left belongings, he climbed the dunes, hard to do, when you climb something that moves under you, well that is sand, one big middle finger to the witcher. Anyway, when he eventually reached the top of the dune, he saw more of those like him, that fell victim to the sand worm. The only difference was the those he noticed were dead or half dead. It seemed that the middle of the group was attacked as well. That meant that Galodo, could be dead or alive and managed to escape the zerrikanians, but the second part was a bit hard to believe. There was no sign of the rest of the group, as they probably advanced or split to cover more ground if Galodo escaped their grasp. No markers to the east or in any other direction.

Gerd slid down the dune where he previously saw a saddle poking out of the sand, on which he hoped to find some supplies, water at least.

The saddle had in one pocket a water canteen half full, one that Gerd took, as in the current situation water was essential and he also found some dried meat. As he advanced east, he kept collecting, from cloth to more water and food, to a few knives and even a bow and a few arrows.

'What ?!', reacted the older man, quite astonished of what the young boy just spoke of. Turning his head toward him, pushing his eyeglasses up with his index finger.

'The pouch of coins...lost...I have.'

'Where ? When ? How ?!'

'Near the fish market, a bird took it-'

'A bird...'

'Yes.'

'A bird ?'.

The younger man nodded his head quickly.

'Bird ?', repeated the old man, giving the young man a long, metal like stare.

'Yes, a bird, haven't you heard me ?'.

The old fart, held back on his pride and then responded, calmly. Looking back at his book he had placed on the table, moved his eyeglasses down near the tip of his nose, continuing what he was previously doing.

'No, just doubtful.', he said, glancing over the pages of the book he held now in his left hand.

'You have me as a liar ?'.

'No, but you did it, just now. So, I assume the bird stealing the pouch of coins I gave you must be a lie too...!'

'It isn't.'.

'Listen, I've been in this house for more than three decades. And not once ! Not even once, have I been robbed by a fuckin' bird.', replied the older one, looking back at his assistant.

'But-'.

'No buts ! What will the master of this house say if she learns of your incompetence ? Do you think she'll believe your excuse about a bird that's stealing coin pouches ?', the old butler paused for a bit, looking at his help, who's face indicated a 'maybe she will', 'No, she won't !', replied angrily the old man, standing up from his bergère.

'Now I have to fix what you so stupidly messed up, young man, you should be ashamed of yourself. If you needed coins to buy something for yourself, you should've asked me for it. Not steal from the one that puts bread on our table !'.

'But...!'

'Young man ! I advise you to not say one more word, for I will strike you. What you just did is a terrible act of selfishness. That coin was not yours to spend. If the master learns of this we could be thrown in the street or worse, be hanged by the neck until death. Only, because of you.', said the butler pointing his index finger towards the young man. after that, he arranged his hair, of which he had only a bit, and took a straight pose.

'I, will go back to the market to buy the fish. While I'm away, you will clean the house. I want to find everything spotless upon my return, understood ?'.

'Yes, sir.'.

'Good. I will be back in approximatively one hour.', continued the older one, after which he grabbed his cane and hat, heading towards the door.

The butler opened the door only to see a cat-eyed tall man. With a scar on his nose bridge and one above his left eye, with his face covered by a thick beard, and surrounded by long brown oily hair. Wearing armor, that was covered by a black rugged cloak and who was carrying two swords on his back. With one hand lifted, ready to knock.

'Can I help you, sir?', asked the butler with a tone that indicate a somewhat surprise, peppered with disgust.

'Yes, I'm looking for the master of this house, Claire Siggmariggen.'

'She is not home at this moment. May I, ask why?'

'One of her associates mentioned that she had a contract for me.'

'As I said previously, she is not home at this moment. Could you come back later?'

'I could. Although, you could also tell me where she is at this moment?'

'I, don't know for sure. As I don't know everything she does, it seems...', responded the butler, looking away at the end of the sentence.

'What does she do? Now honestly, you an obvious versed house servant, doesn't know where his master is at? Do you think I'm that easily fooled?'

'Sir, I can notice from your...Rugged aspect that you are a vagabond, and I'm not going to let you stain the reputation that my master had so hardly build-'

'I told you one of her associates sent me here, for she has a contract-'

'Excuse me, but I find that hard to believe. My master wouldn't spend a mere second in a room with someone such as yourself. So, no!', continued the butler, trying to walk passed the door jamb, but, was stopped by Gerd.

'Fine. I will come back later. However, if you tell me again that she is not home. I will, and be sure of it, cut if needed, through you and any one that stands in my way to get to see her. Got it?'

The butler gulped some spit down his throat, then adopted his straight pose, walked out the door, which he closed with a key, that he so evidently showed to the witcher. Then walked down the stairs in front of the house and down the street, murmuring something.

'Imbecile...Mutant...Not a mere sign of respect nor manners...'

The vagabond, turned and walked away from the door, on the opposite direction the butler did. Heading toward a tavern up the same street. But as he passed an intersection of two streets, a woman's voice called his name.

'Excuse me. Gerd, the witcher?'

He turned back and looked at the woman that spoke his name. She was his employer, Claire Siggmariggen. Who, according to the messenger, had work for him, one with a rather generous reward.

'Yes.', responded the witcher.

'Claire Siggmariggen, pleased to meet you.', she said with a slight bow of her head.

'Same.'.

'I must apologize, for I forgot that you'd visit this morning, I had a couple of errands to take care of. Anyhow, I'm glad I caught you here. Come, we'll talk the details at my house. I suppose you've been there already ?'.

'As a matter of fact, I was. But, I have been send back where I came from by your butler.'.

'Vincentius. He's very strict of who he let's inside the house.'.

'I've noticed.'.

The recent widow, Claire Siggmariggen, was quite a true example of a high-born-noble-woman, given by her looks, gestures, linguistics, even the way she walked. She was an intelligent woman, she knew what and how, when and where. She was like a book, awaiting to be read. Wearing a long black dress, very elegant, with certain golden ornamentations around her shoulders and neck, they were continued down on her waist and the sides of the dress. Which perfectly reflected her status and personality, it combined well with her long blonde hair. Which slid down her shoulders and back.

'He's been rather overprotective since my husband's death.'.

'If I heard right, you need no such protection.'.

'You heard right. We have a lot of common friends, it seems.', responded the noble woman, smiling.

'T'd say so.'.

Soon they've reached the house. The woman walked up the stairs and opened the door, then Gerd followed her inside.

'Please, come in. Mortdecai, we have a guest, prepare some aperitifs and bring a bottle of wine. I will be back shortly, my servant will show you to the next room. Mortdecai...'

'Yes mam. Sir, this way.'.

'Good.', responded the madam, master of the house.

Gerd followed the young servant through a room, with a great table, decorated with paintings and trophies from antlers to tusks of boars and elephants from Zangvebar, then he kept following him to a smaller chamber.

He sat down on a armchair at a small table, while the young servant brought the aperitifs.

While the lady of the house, went upstairs to leave a few of the things she was holding in her right hand.

Several minutes later, she joined the witcher and sat across the table. The young servant brought a bottle of wine and placed it on the table then he stepped back and adopted a straight position, with his left arm behind his back.

'Mortdecai, leave us.', said Claire, pouring herself a glass of wine.

'Yes mam.'

'Please, help yourself. The wine is exquisite.'

'I rather have us talk about the job I'm to do for you.'

'Right...', she said, after which she placed the glass of wine on the table.

'I need you for this job because I heard you are a good tracker, bounty-hunter, and have many other qualities that make you the best choice. Also due the high praises you received from our mutual friend, Erik.'

'As you know my late husband, Hector, died few weeks ago. Yet, I have reasons to believe his death was not natural. Unlike all the doctors on this side of the Pontar claim it to be, a normal death due his feeble heart conditions. A week ago, I hired a mage from Temeria to examine his body and she found traces of poison in his system. That only confirmed the theories I had, that someone wanted my husband dead. And I strongly believe that the men or women responsible for this may try to murder me as well.'

'Any suspects ?'

'Many. Several of them, I might call friends, but, that won't cloud my judgement. Here.', Claire slid one piece of paper in front of the witcher. 'A list with all the names of those I suspect. I want you to find the ones responsible and take care of them.'

'Good. But, are there chances I could speak with the mage ?'

'Yes, she's still in Novigrad, resides in a building near the eastern gate, owned by me, at the second floor. Her name is Keira Metz.'

'Alright. I think it's time I was on my way...', said Gerd, standing up.

'Wait, here.', responded the lady, handing the witcher a key. 'You clearly need a bath, a good bed and a good rest. Do that, before you start your investigation. It is in the same building Keira is, third floor, second door.'

'Thanks.'

'You could, if it pleases you, to stay a bit more...I would enjoy the company, I so rarely have someone to talk to nowadays. Have a drink or something to eat.'

'I really-'.

'Oh. Nonsense ! You're my guest, I can't let you wonder the streets of Novigrad with an empty belly. Please, stay for lunch. Come, follow me to the dining chamber.'. Gerd did as his host insisted and followed her to the big room he entered first on his way to the one he was in previously.

'Mortdecai. Bring us some food.'

'Yes mam.', answered the young man from the next room.

They both sat down on the far end of the table, the closest side to the kitchen. Lady Claire sat at the end of the table, and the witcher on her left side.

'I've heard you've looked for a ship that will go to Skellige, after you finish the job I have for you.'

'I am.'

'For what reason ? I have plenty of other stuff you could take care of. Here in Novigrad.'

'Visit some old friends.'

'I guess they'll be very happy to see you.'

'Those still alive, yes.'

'I feel some nostalgia in your voice.'

'I guess, there have been some years since the last time I've been there.'

'Hmm. I know the feeling so well, you see, I was born and raised in Kovir. I came to Novigrad after I married my husband, Hector, and since then I haven't been back home...I miss it dearly. Of course my parents and sister would visit. But, that still doesn't make this feel like home. No matter how much I change it in order to make it look and feel like home. In truth, it still isn't.'

'At least it is something...'

The lady showed a smile regarding the witcher's recent words.

'It seems like we could have a good and long talk, doesn't it ?'

'It does seems so.'

The two shared some stories. As both had some mutual friends, connections in the underworld, things that provided some very interesting tales. Between a noble-born-woman

and a monster slayer, a vagabond, a witcher.

'When is the next ship leaving for the isles ?'.

'In several weeks from now. The routes to the Islands have been reduced due the presence of some pirate ships in the area.'.

'Well, that means you have some time to explore the city of Novigrad and it's vast outskirts...!'

'Yes, plenty.', responded Gerd, smiling.

'Oh. Thank you, Mortdecai.'.

The young man arranged the food on the table, the silverware, he placed the careful cut slices of bread and opened a bottle of wine, while the two were chatting.

The guest and the host, began to eat the delicious lunch served by the young servant.

Not long after, the old butler returned home with the fish he bought from the market. Hanged his cane and hat, and walked towards the kitchen. That's when he noticed that half of the chores he gave the young Mortdecai were left unfinished, so he walked to the dining chamber from where he heard the sound of silverware hitting on the porcelain plates. And from where he surprisingly heard the laughs of his master and of another, a male. He took his usual straight back position and entered the room.

'Mam, sir...!', he then looked around for his help, Mortdecai, and as soon as he saw him, he indicated with his left hand's index finger, pointing so aggressively to the floor, to move his bottom there as quick as possible.

'Yes-'.

'What is he doing in the house !?', he angrily whispered, between his teeth.

'The lady let him in.'.

'Wha- Why ?'.

'From what I deduced so far, she has some work for him.'.

The butler puffed, gathering his left hand fingers into a fist, and moved his forearm behind his back. Then walked past them as they were eating, to the kitchen with his fish in the right hand.

...

'Lady Claire, thank you for your hospitality.'.

'No need to thank me. You're an interesting guest to have.'.

The witcher got up from the table, and followed by his host, headed towards the door.

'So long.'

'I'll see you soon.', replied watching as Gerd stepped down the stairs in front of the house.

He then advanced on to the side of the street, heading to the other side of the city. He was eager to get a very much deserved bath and a good night's rest, after which he planned to visit the mage, to ask her about the poison she'd found in Hector's corpse.

Soon, he reached the building he was to stay in during the time he searches for the one that committed the deed. On his way to the third floor he looked for the room Keira was in, just to know. As he approached the door he started to have a bad feeling. Thus, when he was only steps away from the room he heard some noises of glass breaking and tables rolling. He immediately grabbed the door knob and pushed the door open, with one hand and the other on the grip of his steel sword.

The room seemed pretty trashed, draperies pulled down, a broken table, books all over the floor, a vase that held a hand of flowers, more exactly tulips and daisies, shattered. Shards from the glasses of wine laying broken on the floor, few tankards here and there. From all that he assumed something did happen. But, as Gerd advanced further inside the mage's flat, he noticed a few drops of blood near a door jamb leading to another room, one of the door's hinges was broken. The blood was fresh, the only thing he hoped for was for it to not be Keira's. He heard a sound of a something, big, hitting the wall, a deep bang, on the wall on the right side from the door.

Gerd kicked through the broken door, sword in hand, ready to slice the intruder. But, it was no need for such intervention from the witcher, as the mage held a long knife in both hands, with which she had stabbed the attacker, who was leaning on the floor with his back against the wall, bleeding from his upper abdomen.

Keira, left the grip of the blade from her hands as she was still looking at her attacker, then she addressed the witcher.

'Who're you ? And what do you want ?', she asked, having her hands on her hips, still looking at the man that tried to kill her, then moved her eyes off the dying man and looked at the one that entered through the door in such a hurry, 'Don't answer, I already know.'

All looks peaceful from afar

.XII. All looks peaceful from afar.

It was a beautiful morning on the Isles of Skellig, where spring had finally arrived once again. On Ard Skellig, at the keep of the School of the Bear, a group of four young witchers were present in the inner courtyard. Two of them, were getting ready to leave the keep for a quick morning practice in the woods east of the fortress.

Among them was the young witcher called Junod of Belhaven, who was eager to get out of the gloomy fortress.

'Junod. Quit pacing around, he'll be here, soon.'

The young witcher replied with a scowl, as he sat down on a barrel with his arms crossed. 'He'd better be...', responded the young pupil. 'I awaited long enough for his lazy, late awaking butt !'.

'You know that when he has a woman up there he is always late. And you barely been here for half an hour.'

'You say it as if it hasn't been a long time at all...', Junod scoffed, kicking a pebble with his right foot into the wall of the keep. 'He promised he'll be down, before the sunlight would dare touch the top of the eastern tower...'

'Did he make that promise today, by any chance ?'

'Last night.'

'Huh...', Gerd chuckled.

'What ?'

'If I remember right, he was quite drunk...', Gerd added.

'Really ?', replied Junod with a sigh and a subtle frown. 'Gerd...', he continued, with a slight smile. 'Why can't he be more like you ?'

'Nice try. Appeasing to my non-existent narcissistic side...', Gerd replied, clicking his tongue. 'However, I appreciate what you're trying to accomplish...'

'Come on, he's obviously not coming out 'till noon...'

Gerd responded with a slight smile, as he then resumed his attention to what he was previously doing, cleaning his gear.

'The old man didn't give you any assignment for today. So, why can't you come with me ?', continued Junod, getting up from the barrel and walking towards Gerd, who was cleaning his steel blade. 'Please. Would you rather spend your time in the keep, doing nothing. Then go out ? Maybe, we'll get some work. Make some coin...'

'The thing about not having any assignments for the day, does not mean you are free to do nothing nor is one forbidden to find something. There are blades that need cleaning, clothes and armor too. And if that does not feel appealing to you, there are floors within the keep that need sweeping and scrubbing. What I mean is, that there's always something to do...'

'But, wouldn't you like to go out ? Come on ! You haven't left the keep for at least four days...'

'That's because I didn't have to. There had been plenty of chores to do, chores I couldn't let Neena do all by herself. Because I ought to help her as much as I can, while I'm still at the keep.', Gerd said, as he finished up cleaning his silver blade. 'If you want to go out so much ask Ezven, if you can join him and Ayo.'

'He's working on a contract...', Junod replied, sitting on the stump across from Gerd. 'Can't you just come with me ?', he then proceeded to ask, whilst he stared at his own boots, as Gerd remained silent. 'I'll help around...', Junod murmured.

Gerd sighed. 'Since you won't quit pestering me about it...', he said standing up. 'Fine. Let me go grab my crossbow...'

'Yes !', said Junod joyfully, jumping on his feet.

'But, keep in mind, I expect you to keep your word.'

'Yes...', Junod muttered.

'Starting tomorrow.', Gerd continued, as he left towards the entrance of the keep.

'Fine.', Junod added, with a puff.

From behind, Ayo, another young witcher present in the courtyard, who until now taunted the younger witchers, sparring near the dummies, approached Junod. 'So, going with Gerd, huh ?', Ayo inquired, leaning on a couple of crates, containing dimeritium bombs.

'I am.', answered Junod.

'Think I could join ?'

'I suppose. If, you want to share a part of my chores ?'

Ayo replied with a short laugh. 'No thanks. I have my own.'

'Well you almost took Yuri's eye...'

'If his footwork had been anywhere close to decent, that wouldn't have happened...', Ayo replied, clicking his tongue.

'Still...'

'Shut up, will you...', Ayo continued giving Junod a nudge over the shoulder. 'Isn't it enough that the old man keeps on reminding me, every chance he gets.'

'Well, you did make some trouble the last time you and Ezven have been out, too.'

'I was cheated.'

'How could you be sure ?'

'Because I-'

'Tried to cheat yourself. I played cards with you, I know your schemes.', Junod said, with a sniff. 'The cheater got cheated, Ksander said that's a good lesson to be taught...'

'Which lesson ? Never bet all your coin-'

'I don't know, he kept rumbling non-sense after that...'

'Anyway...', Ayo said, clearing his throat. 'What are we doing today ?', asked Ayo after a time.

On some rare occasions the young witchers had a day in which they had the chance to practice whatever they wanted, from sword fighting, sign casting to alchemy and/or peruse through the thick books and parchments of the witcher bestiary.

'I thought to practice Igni, since I had few issues casting it lately...'

'I for one want to improve my sword play, Ezven told me we'd practice today, but he hasn't returned yet.'

'From where ?'

'He told me he got a contract on Undvik, so he went there yesterday morning.'

The witcher Ezven of Talgar was as old as Gerd and grew up alongside him and Ksander. He was of Kovir origins, found by Mousar. As he tried to steel the old's man swords. When asked why, he said he wanted to sell them for food.

'Ayo. Ezven's not back yet ?', asked Gerd.

'No, can I come with you ?'

'Alright. Let's go.'

The three witchers left the fortress and headed on foot towards the village of Blandare and then the forest to the east.

'Why are we going to the village ?', asked Ayo.

'We're just doing a errand for Neena, got to pick something up from the inn.'

'And after we go to the forest ? Right ?', began Junod.

'Mhm.', murmured Gerd.

'Can we get some dumplings from the inn ?'.

'Got any coin ?'.

'No...'

'Then how you'd buy them ?'.

'You'll buy them for us ? No ?'.

'No.'

'Why ?'.

'Did Ksander ever bought you one ?'.

'No...', answered Junod, almost whispering.

'Then why would I buy you one ?'.

'Because you're not him ?'.

'Fine.'

'Yes !'.

'But, you'll have to fight me and Ayo for it once we get to the forest. If you win, you get a dumpling, if you lose, you get nothing.'

'Wait, that is not fair...'

'Nothing is.', responded Gerd, while Junod slowed his pace and remained behind.

'Damn it.', whispered Junod frustrated.

'Coming ?', asked Gerd with a smile on his face.

'Yes, I am...', answered Junod, quickening his steps.

Time had not been kind to them, the witchers...

Considered unhuman, mutants, even called 'as monstrous as the very beasts they slay', by several revered personalities of the church or state, some of them monarchs. Several schools had to disappear due the toxic reputation they had, the cat, the viper, even the griffin. It was always the same, one of them turned assassin, did such an illicit act that the only solution was that they had to be hunted like animals by some angry lord's men. Or because without any reason or provocation they slaughtered an entire village...

The truth to all of those is a simple one, witchers as unhuman as they are, they still have what folks call humanity in them. All the years they hunted drowners in muddy slums and basilisks in mushy forests, without even having a choice at first. Those men had been left out by the world, exiled from society, having no other purpose but to track and kill, collect then repeat. Not all found a person to care about, some saw no reason in living, lost the very flame of existence, purpose.

Therefore going rogue, seeking something for themselves, a selfish thought at least for once.

Gerd for one, never had an opportunity to know what could've been if his parents had survived. Yet he was thankful for what he had. Almost one could've said that he was happy with what he was doing, most of the time...

...Before, well, before all there was nothing, isn't it ? Or how was it ? Hmm, fuck, can't put my finger on it. By the way...Where does this fuckin' desert end !?

That was one of the thoughts that haunted Gerd's head. Besides that there were no other chains of special thoughts or any kind of ideas. When he saw a dune of sand after four other dunes of sand he would frown, then carry on. He felt like seeing a blank page of a manuscript, clean, white as snow, no trace of ink on it's surface, just that clean white. He wasn't frustrated that he lost his target or that he had been separated from the people who could've guided him through this land of dust and sand. Interesting, as he used to be hot tempered a while ago, had a short patience as well. But that's from when he was a young witcher still, not used to all the none sense this world has, the kind that can fully drown you in it.

There was not much he could think of anyway, he was calm, nor the blazing sun or the hot sand, nor the places it got to could anger him anymore. He just walked, through it like he would do through a forest or a frozen tundra. He didn't see another worm either, just sand. Lots of it.

He was walking east for some time now, days, three of them, almost. He still had enough food and water for five more.

Soon, after he passed on the other side of a dune, Gerd noticed signs of what had been a fight, among four or five men. That ended with two bodies, which were naked, laying in the sand, having signs of multiple puncturing wounds around their torso, and cuts around their ankles and wrists. That could mean that the two were slaves or prisoners, whatever of the two. They escaped their captors who later caught them and as they showed resistance, they were killed. That happened probably sometime last night as the bodies were still in a good condition. The heat of the daylight would've accelerated the decomposing process to a point that the cause of their death would've been hard to determine.

Then a few more meters away, south-east, he found the body of a soldier wearing Haakland breastplate. The corpse was not far from those of the slaves or prisoners that had been murdered. Next to the soldier was his horse, half of it. Was it a worm that attacked him ? Or perhaps something else...

Whatever it was, the area Gerd was in was it's hunting ground. And for sure it didn't kill the soldier, he died from falling off the horse at galloping speed. His breastplate broke in two pieces at the moment of the impact with the sand, and one of the pieces pierced through his left side of the torso and through his left lung.

'Drowned in his own blood. Not a pleasant way to go...!'

'The horse, not bitten, eaten...', began Gerd, while he looked around some more. 'By something big, really big...!'

'It couldn't be that for once, just once, things don't get even more fucked up ?', he asked to whatever and whoever was listening, or just to himself, as he walked further east...

As Gerd was advancing east, the dunes of sand began to uncover a vast feeding ground of a ferocious beast. The sand was saturated with blood to a point in which it appeared of the same color as the crimson substance. Human, animal and even other monsters dead, decomposing corpses were scattered around. But, no sign of the one responsible for an entire valley covered with it's trophies.

Like he previously observed, this monster didn't feed on all the kills it made, some, humans for instance, were horribly disfigured, some missing limbs or even their other half. It was clearly killing those that entered it's territory.

The corpses didn't show or tell many things about what the killer was, besides the evident parts.

'Sharp teeth or claws...', murmured Gerd, inspecting some of the most recent looking human frames.

Just few steps to the left another human carcass was laying with it's left side of the mid section 'missing'. Gerd proceeded to it's location next.

'It finished them, but it wasn't the one who chewed on this particular one. Something else did though...!'

Soon after he risen for the corpse and looked around, then for a moment stood still, listening around, for a sound to follow.

Nothing.

'Quiet as a graveyard...', murmured Gerd. Who after walked towards the top of one dune.

'Is it not here ? Out hunting ? Hmm...!'

All looks so peaceful from afar, but, what doesn't ?

From the top of the dune, he saw the Sandstone Hills, to it's left the imposing canyon valleys and the Plateau of Uut. He could traverse through or go around, climbing the high plateau. Where he'd surely meet his monster...

A Tale of the Raven

.XIII. A Tale of the Raven.

Far, far from any of the usual places he would call home, in a place in which no one even thought he'd be at that moment...

As through the rags, shirts and trousers hanged on a rope near the bridge passing over the Velda waving in the breeze, one would easily spot his figure laying on the river's southern bank, much alike a corpse would, on his right side with his head resting on his arm, surrounded here and there by algae, rocks and dead fishes. For not long after, with a few mutters he rolled on his back, and then rose up from the ground with a couple of grunts, moving the rags aside with his left hand. From afar one could notice the marks on his hand, wounds, old and recent, some fresh, around his knuckles, who were marked with a spice of dried blood. He was bare feet and wore nothing but his trousers. Stank of booze from meters away, even if you didn't get the stench that the occasional breeze would bring around, due the rotten fish miasma which was covering the area for a few days now.

On one side of the river stood Ebbing and on the other Maecht, two independent kingdoms at that time, free of Nilfgaard.

Not a day away on a horse ride west was the part where the river unites with The Great Sea.

As he was walking towards the road, away from Velda's northern bank, to a place where a group of merchants made camp.

It was midday, the men and women in the camp made preparations for their midday meal. One old man was already steering the pot, heating their lunch, stew.

'Aha !', shouted the man tending to the pot of stew atop the fire. 'We thought you were dead...!'

The stranger scoffed, scratching his unshaven cheek. 'That's why you didn't fuss to get me to shore ? I mean why bother, when the floods will soon come...!'

'Exactly. You do know the way we think, northling...!', answered the merchant, grabbing a bowl.

'I'm from Vicovaro, by the way.', the dark haired individual said, sitting on a stump, a mere few steps from the fire.

'Is that so...!', the merchant smiled, handing the individual a bowl of stew. 'Here...!'. The old man had a charm around him, of a man that was passed his life's summer, seemed wiser than he let on.

'Thanks.'.

'No need to be polite, It is not needed. I'm happy to help. As you did, last night...', said the merchant, looking at the man hailed from Vicovaro. 'It is us who should thank you...!'

'I did what I thought to be fair.', responded the man.

'You stopped them, but at what risk ?', asked the merchant. 'The wounds they got you are not fatal, but why care ? We don't mean anything to you. We, are strangers...!'

'It was the right thing to do. I couldn't let you be robbed by some pricks...!'

'You have a good heart. Few have nowadays...!'

'I was just drunk...!'

'Most would've just left us to our fate. But, you stayed and fought them, even chased after them...!'

'And look where that got me. I have no gear, no swords and no coin.'

'We'll help you son. Stay with us 'till we reach Nazair, as protection along the way, we sure need one like you. What do you say ? Five hundred ducats ? Come with us, we will tend to your wounds and give you a place to sleep and a warm meal along the way. Let us repay you...!'

'This meal is oughta do.'

'No. It is simply too little.', the gemmerian merchant replied, with a hiss as if insulted. 'What you did, saved many lives, of daughters, son's and parents alike, I cannot let you walk half naked, beaten and hungry because of us. Besides you mentioned you're travelling north as well, therefore we have a common destination. I won't stop pestering you, until, you agree...!', continued the merchant, ending with a smile.

'Be it your way...', murmured the witcher.

'Great !', strongly agreed the merchant, grabbing a bite from a piece of bread and slurping some stew from the bowl.

An hour or so later, the new member of the merchant caravan was prepared to leave north, hired as a protector on their way to the sunny lands of Nazair.

Close to the road side part of the camp, the stranger sat on a keg, chewing on a fried chicken leg, next to him near a table a woman was folding a piece of blue cloth. She gave the man a few stares, frequent. The man from Vicovaro did not pay attention, he had more pressing thoughts. He probably noticed her talking to him, however, he heard nothing but, '...your name ?'.

'What ?', replied the man, as he shook his head.

The woman smiled then repeated her previous question.

'What's your name ?'.

'Ksander. Yours ?'.

'You didn't- Nua. My name is Nua.'

'Is it something that I can help you with ? Nua ?'.

'To know you better, if I could.'

The man smiled, then gave an answer to the woman's request.

'Trust me, it'll do you more harm than good, so better not.', replied Ksander, closing his gambeson.

'I beg to differ...', continued the woman, 'Besides I can think of certain ways I would like you to 'harm' me.'. She then walked behind him, leaned towards him and placed her hands on his shoulders, simultaneously moving her head next to his, whispering in his right ear : 'I've never been fucked by a witcher...'.

Plateau of Ashes

.XIV. Plateau of Ashes.

Uneven, layers upon layers,
Of ancient dust,
Pressed
in the shape of an old message.
The Ashes spread upon the red, sun bathed rocks,
Enslaved
At the will of Time...

'Eunick ! Son-of-a-whore !', yelled an angry islander, 'Do' yee know what yee did, huh ?', then as he stood above the one he questioned, he punched him between the eyes. 'Do yee ? Is that what your old man taught yee ?'.

He kept on questioning the man that was unconsciously murmuring nonsense. Words that only made the other even angrier, like he felt challenged to deliver a few more fists to the others face.

'Arik. Leave him be ! The gods will-', said a man next to him.

'They'll do nothing, not to this coward', screamed Arik, spitting on the others face. 'May the seas swallow yee next time you set sail. Fuckin' bastard !'.

At the door of the inn, stood Gerd, who now walked towards a table. Where, as always, Ksander sat, drinking from a tankard.

'What's this about ?', asked Gerd as he sat down.

'From what I gathered thus far...The one that has blood smeared all over his face, fucked the others sister, knocked her up, then left her. As you already may deduced he's not from here, some Redanian arse, that came to the isles around a month ago...'.

Gerd nodded his head, 'He won't eat solid food any time soon.'.

Ksander, lifted from his shoulders, then gulped down whatever was left in the tankard.

'So, are we going back ?'.

'Have a drink, or two...'

'No.', strongly said Gerd.

'Fine, we're going...', replied Ksander.

Then they both walked out of the Inn, Ksander first.

'Dammit ! It's bright outside...'

'That's what you get after spending a half day insi...'

The witcher's eyes quickly opened, at the same time his right hand reached for the handle of his sword. He noticed a lot of vibrations coming from above. From what he had gathered thus far, they were around five in numbers.

He slept in a crack within the wall of the canyon. Above was the top of the plateau, and below a path, that was going downward towards the entrance to a cave. A cave in which he believed the monster that prowled the area used as a lair.

They were walking now above him, one descended from the top of the plateau on the path that led towards the cave. It was more of a narrow rock formations that were near the top. The only way to get to it was climbing the wall, or descending from the plateau.

He heard a couple of voices above, one of them seemed familiar. The one that was now on the path towards the cave, had been joined by three others. While on top, few more had come to help whatever the initial five were doing.

They were the Zerrikanians. As Gerd already did mention the possibility of Galodo's escape, this made that possibility a reality, as the Zerrikanians were searching for him. Looking, searching every spot down the path, every hole, crevasse a man could squeeze in.

After many days in which the witcher saw nothing resembling human activity, nor any kind of tracks, this had been a sign he welcomed.

He heard chatter above him, he couldn't make sense of whatever it was about, but he made sense of something. It was the frustration in their voices, their movement was slow paced, they were tired...

'Then, you know why I'm here ?', asked the witcher.

'I do. You want to ask about the poison I had found inside the body of our employer's husband.', responded the mage. 'Yet...', she resumed, looking at the assailant, who was choking on his own blood. '...I believe our current situation is a bit more important and time pressing. Don't you agree ?'

'Keira...'

'No formalities ? How rude...!', replied the mage.

'I-'

'You'll help me get information out of this hunk of dying flesh. Then rid me of his dead carcass by discharging it in the luxurious sewers of Novigrad.', she interrupted. 'Afterwards, we'll address the matter for which you barged through my door to talk about.'

'Listen, I-'

'Don't you dare finish that sentence.', she said, with a serious tone.

'Fine.', grinned the witcher. 'You, speak. Who put you up to this ?', resumed Gerd, making the sign of Axii.

From the man, that sat down on the floor leaning on a cabinet, came no words.

'Sure your spell works ?', asked the mage, mocking the witcher.

'Shit...!', muttered Gerd. 'He can't talk...for he has no tongue.'

'That renders him useless.', continued Keira, annoyed.

She then turned, and went into the next room. The witcher walked in the chamber from where he came, he then looked back at the man that attacked Keira, only to see the mage striking him in the head with a candleholder.

Keira walked in the room Gerd was, placing the object she struck the man with on a cabinet near the door.

'What ?', Keira asked, walking to the place where her megascope was, checking it for damage.

'Couldn't you bother to cast some spell to find out what he knew ?'.

'Huh, I can't read minds, witcher. He could have had someone peeking through those eyes of his...!'

'My medallion would've-!'

'Tremble like an old's peasants knees in the winter. Whatever...!', interrupted the mage. 'Better to be sure.'.

'Why do you think he tried to...you know...!'

'Murder me ? I don't have the faintest clue, witcher.', replied the mage.

'Right...!', began the witcher, 'Time I clean your mess.', he resumed, walking towards the man laying face down on the floor.

Gerd decided to descend from the hole he used as bed, onto the narrow path.

'Hey.', began the witcher. 'Don't go further.', he said slowly, moving his hands in ways to express what he was saying. 'Something lives in the cave.' he continued, pointing the certain opening within the canyon's wall. 'Do you understand ?'.

The Zerrikanian that saw him, nudged the others to look as well. There were two women behind him, one of them called someone from the top of the plateau.

Soon from the top of the plateau, a voice, 'Gerd ?', it was Biua. 'The others said you're dead. Hah, but I didn't. Come on up.'.

'Tell them to stop advancing, there is something in the cave.'.

'We know, don't fret.', she then called those on the path, they then turned and climbed to the top.

The witcher joined them. When he reached the top, Biua was laughing.

'You pale, cat-eyed bastard...Come here !', said Biua, hugging Gerd so hard that his bones clicked. 'Glad to know you alive, wait 'till Tara and Veya see you, hah !'

The witcher and the zerrikanian group, walked to the south eastern side of the plateau, where according to Biua, they had a camp.

'You did good comin' here. I guess you know he escaped, don't you ?'.

'Mhm, thought of it when I saw wagons from the middle section of the group shattered to pieces.', responded Gerd.

'He ain't far.', said Biua.

'He's alone ?'.

'Not alone, no. A Haakland soldier joined him...!', she answered, pissed about the fact. 'He's one lucky prick !'.

'Tell me about it...!', Gerd said, than drank some water from a canteen. 'What of his wife ?'.

'We had them in different carriages, she's fine. Damn shame the worm didn't get that cunt !'.

Gerd snorted. 'A bit, yes.'.

They kept on talking along the way towards the camp. Gerd thought about what would have happened if he had met Galodo instead of the zerrikanians. He surely would've smiled from ear to ear to get his much wanted end of this contract which already prolonged itself to a point in which he'd want, if he had met Galodo, to cut him in half, with one clean slash from his shoulders to his hips. A cut in which he would have placed all his frustration that he gathered within him those weeks he chased the mercenary. He'd watch all the blood pour out of his lifeless body, then decapitate him and drive his head through a hook and hang it on his

horse's saddle, if he had one, as he lost his faithful mare when the worm attacked. Anyhow, if that would have not happen, ride his mare with the freshly decapitate skull as a trophy back to Spalla. Get his coin, then find a tavern, where he would have in mind to drink all the beer and vodka he can gulp down, and eat all the lamb, pig, chicken, and calf meat he could stuff in his belly, then sleep for days. After, a visit to the best brothel in town, pick a beautiful lass and hump her from dusk 'till dawn. Afterwards he'd return on the path and ride to the next city, village, or town, where he would look up a contract and continue his never ending chase for coin.

But that was long way away from happening, and he knew it, and that thing made him even more enraged. Which helped, to a certain degree...

'Thank you, witcher, for disposing me so elegantly of that stinking corpse.', said the mage, while taking a sip of wine from a golden goblet she held in her right hand. 'I know you came all the way here to learn of something, and I won't hold you anymore. The poison I found in Hector's system was of a different kind that the ones I'm used to.'

'How so?', asked Gerd, leaning on the door jamb.

'Don't interrupt and I shall tell you ! Anyway, it didn't come from plants such as Actaea Pachypoda, or Atropa Belladonna. However, from what I seen by analyzing the poison, it came from a draconid, possibly a basilisk.'

'Basilisk, huh?', the witcher paused for a bit, nodding his head slowly. 'If administrated in a low dose, like half a milliliter, which is enough to spice a certain drink for example. Would lead to cardiac arrest in less than twenty minutes.'

'This Implies our killer may have some connections in the black market.'

'Seems so.', replied Gerd, crossing his arms. 'I do know someone in the city that could have such a substance in his possession.'

'Who's that?', asked Keira taking another sip of wine.

'An old pal, a herbalist, Frances Rourterggest.'

'Never heard of him...'

'He's not that famous. He has a shop not far from here.'

'Looks like you have a lead. Do tell me if you uncover something.', Keira said, walking towards the witcher. 'Now go on, out the door, chop-chop, I have to take a bath. I'll see you later.'

'Yeah, later.', said the witcher, walking out the door.

Common Foe

.XV. Common Foe.

'Gerd.', she said softly as her lips touched his left shoulder.

'Hmm ?', he moaned, half asleep.

'I heard you are planning a visit to Skellige come spring ?', Ayanna asked, clutching his left arm between her breasts.

'Really, who told you ?', he answered, opening his closed eyes, looking at the ceiling.

'Does it matter ?', she replied, resting her head on Gerd's shoulder.

'It does not. I don't know...', he responded, turning his head and fixing his eyes onto hers, then sighed. 'I'll probably come looking for you...'

She smiled, while her eyes looked into Gerd's. She then moved herself on top of the witcher, placing her right palm on his cheek, grabbing his lower lip between hers...

'Wake up, you pale bastard. We've got news !', said Biua, hitting Gerd's tent and instantly waking him, from his most recent good dream.

He got out of the tent with a few moans. Shielding his eyes from the blinding hot sun, which was tirelessly shining on the blue sky above the plateau. As he went yawning, to empty his bladder at the edge of the plateau. Then walked back to camp, where he washed his face with some water he had left from last night in the bucket near his tent. And after, he proceeded towards Biua's tent.

'Ah, you're finally here.', said Biua, as she was waiting for him. 'We got news about Galodo and the Haakland soldier. Some of our scouts tracked them down to a cave formation not far from the plateau.', she continued as they entered the tent.

'No contact ?', asked the witcher, taking a mug and filled it with some water from a bucket placed near the table.

'No, I told them to stay put. We don't want to startle them.', she approached the table, rolling a hand drawn map of the area. 'They're here.', she pointed on the map. 'Now, those caves could have stored within, one of Galodo's stashes.'

'Meaning they won't leave anytime soon. Therefore, they probably have set up some traps, and are awaiting uninvited guests...', continued Gerd, then drank from the mug.

'That's right.', said Biua. 'And, that Haaklander is one tough son of a whore. It took me and Maa a few good hits to put him down.'

'Any news from the Chief's camp ?'.

'No, but, last time we had any word from them, they were still advancing towards the oasis. We'll meet them there after we finish this.', answered Biua, glancing over the map.

'Is it far ?'.

'Not far, a day or two from here. The oasis of Gawa, is the closest source of water from here. So, rationalize your water, you'll need it.', said Biua. 'You and I will try to infiltrate their camp at the fall of darkness. So, you better brew some of your witcher potions, you'll need them. We might not be as lucky as those two on our way there.'

'Halt ! We need to inspect your wagon.', said one of the two guards stationed at the entrance located on the southern side of Novigrad, at the Glory Gate.

'But sir. I have only spices, meat and herbs back there...', replied the driver.

'We'll check anyway. Just to be sure.', said the guard, adding a slight smirk at the end.

'Sir, I have a permit for this transport...', said the driver, trying to get off the wagon, and go after the guard.

'Stay where you are halfling. Show me that permit.', spoke the other guard.

'Here...', said the driver, handing the guard the transport's documents and permit.

The guard glanced over the piece of paper the halfling handed to him. 'It is not the right permit. This one is no longer valid.'

'It was good three days ago-', began the driver, till' he was stopped by the guard's long stare as he was reaching for the handle of his sword, intended as a warning.

'The new regulations require the renewal of such document each month, your document has expired yesterday. Your transport shall be inspected and if it is suspect of certain questionable substances or other objects that do not appear on the documentation you had presented, you shall pay a fine of two hundred and fifty crowns, plus another fine for the expired permit, which is of one hundred and eighty crowns.'

The driver put his left hand on his head, huffed, and looked at the walls of the city. Then his eyes fixed on a tall individual that was on the other side of the bridge, walking through the gate.

'Gerd !', yelled the driver. 'Here. Gerd !', raising from his stool, waving.

The witcher heard the halfling, and walked straight towards him. The guards didn't seem to be happy about him coming their way. Gerd looked at the guards and as soon as he got near

the wagon he addressed the guard that had in his hand the non-human's documents and permit.

'What's the issue here ?', asked the witcher.

'What ?', replied the guard. 'Move along. This doesn't concern you.'

'I think it does...', Gerd responded. 'As it looks like, you're harassing the driver. Hoping for some easy coin ?'.

'Listen. You pile of horse shite !', the guard began while placing his left hand on his belt, then spat. 'Walk away while you still can ! Before I and my partner have to scatter your entrails all over this bridge !', said the guard, grabbing his sword hilt, attempting to draw it.

Gerd's reaction was a quick and effective head-butt straight in the guards nose bridge, which made him fall on his bottom. The other got out from behind the wagon and as quickly as he saw what happened, Gerd shot him in the shoulder with his crossbow, and fell near the wagon. Propping himself on the back wheel of the carriage.

'Ruvio, get the wagon to Frances.', said the witcher to the halfling.

'Right away.', replied Ruvio, grabbing and shaking the reins.

'I know you're working for Verner.', Gerd began helping the guard with the broken nose stand up. 'If he asks, tell him you got the wrong wagon...!'

'Shit, you are that witcher...From the Skellige Isles.', said the guard with the broken nose.

'Funny. You remembered that only after I struck you ?'.

'Mhm, really amusing...', he replied. 'I recall him mentioning you had some business within the city. Sadly our boss forgot to add it could intertwine with ours at some point.'

'And we didn't know the halfling was working for Rourterggest.', continued the other with a moan, kneeled down in the middle of the road.

Gerd walked towards the one he shot. He didn't bleed much, the arrow had no special tip, it was quite dull actually. Made of one piece, this arrow was mostly used by Gerd when fighting humans that he didn't need to actually kill, but injure. So, when he got near the guard, Gerd pulled the arrow out.

'Fuck ! Couldn't you warn me first ?!'

'What for ? It wasn't deep inside anyway...', replied Gerd, taking the arrow and cleaning it with a piece of cloth, then placed it back in his crossbow. 'Come on, get up.', he continued, helping the man stand. 'I hope we won't meet again.'. They nodded and walked back to the barracks, or to their boss.

Gerd, walked to the stables not far from the bridge, to get his mare.

After he finished his talk with Keira, he went to visit the herbalist Frances Rourterggest, who was not only a mere herbalist but an informant for Zedt Verner, a vicious underworld boss, and leader of the gang that owned the south-western side of Novigrad. His control of this particular area gained him access to everything that entered or left the port. Knowledge meant power. And with informants in other gangs within the city of Novigrad he had knowledge of any kind of deal that went through the streets. Rarely something missed his eyes, and by rare it means that it hasn't, not even once.

Anyhow, Frances told Gerd he might need some help with a transport, that could be stopped at one of the southern gates. He knew the two guards stationed there were two dimwits, and may hold Ruvio's wagon.

After which he asked Gerd for that small favor.

Day slowly passed into dusk, while the short withering moments left of daylight where slowly passing beyond of what was left to see of the Blue Mountains. Gerd and Biua, with two zerrikanian women in tow, made their way down from the top of the plateau towards the cave formations not far from the camp.

The descent from the top of the plateau was quick and by the time the sun disappeared beyond the whimpering shape that was left of the Blue Mountains, Gerd, Biua and the two women were already close to the caves.

Gerd was following a few tracks he saw since a couple of miles back from the plateau. He believed them to be of certain arachnomorphs, commonly known as spotted spiders.

'Don't concern yourself with the tracks, witcher. Their hunting ground is a mile north from here. It is very unlikely for us to meet one. By the looks of it, this is a young one that got a bit too far from their territory, that means it'll be an easy kill.', said Biua, checking the walls of the canyon.

Their position of luck suddenly changed when they reached the front of the cave formations. As expected there had been traps laid in the sand by the mercenary and the haakland soldier. And they have already caught the spotted spider, who's tracks had been noticed by Gerd previously. It caught itself in several bear traps laid in front of the cave entrance, and one of the two slayed the monster with a bolt released from a mobile ballista, that they had installed inside the cave. The bolt pierced through the beast's abdomen and stopped in the canyon wall east of the caves.

'Someone is sitting near the ballista.', whispered the witcher.

'I don't see anything...', replied Biua. 'But, you see better then any of us do in the dark, so...'.

'That ballista is mobile. It would probably take both of them to move it. And since the conditions in a cave are not quite ideal for one of those. It would take them a while to do it. I could try to make a run towards the cave, by the time they see me It'll be too late.'

'What about the traps they placed in front of the entrance ?'. responded Biua.

'I can find my way between the bear traps, by following the spider's tracks. I can try to clear a path for you as well.'

Biua nodded.

Without his heavy armor, Gerd was as he put it 'light as a feather'. After all his fast reflexes were pretty quick with all the heaviness of the Ursine Armor, without it, he was even quicker, faster and more agile. He advanced crouched and ready to roll back or in any other direction had there been the need to do so.

He was sure that they didn't have the time to properly hide the traps deep enough in the sand. And there was a small chance that under the sand might be something else besides the bear traps. Like pits with spikes, but that one seemed exaggerated in the current situation, he thought, and he was probably right.

As he thought the bear traps had been covered with little sand, and most of them had been set off by the spider. When he reached the place where the dead spider was resting, he had only a few more steps left until the cave's entrance.

He looked back where the zerrikanian women were, then, he looked for any slight bump or any kind of metal piercing out of the sand. He saw nothing of the sort, if he did, he wasn't sure what to believe. So, he took some steps back and leapt forward, and used his momentum to leap again. In doing so he alerted the Haakland soldier, who stood near the ballista.

He was clueless, regarding what was the creature that passed by the entrance. He knew it went to his right. And that was all he figured out.

Gerd stopped next to the wall of the canyon, near the entrance to the grotto. Drawing his steel sword, he slowly walked along the wall towards the entrance to the cavern. Beyond the edge of the wall was the haaklander with a saber in hand.

But was of no effect whatsoever against the witcher's Aard sign, which propelled the soldier into the wall with immense power, Gerd then bolted further inside the cave. He was welcomed by Galodo, who appeared from the right side of the cavern, swinging a sword horizontally to which Gerd responded with a block and a roll, that if he had tried to turn into a pirouette would've cut clean through the mercenary's neck. Which would've got him in a lot of trouble with the zerrikanians, so he resumed to a strong punch to Galodo's head, making him lose balance and sent him few steps back and stopped when he hit the wall behind.

'Don't try anything...', grunted the witcher. His eyes glittering in the darkness of the cave.

The mercenary lifted his arms and did as the witcher advised.

30th of Birke, Belleteyn !

.XVI. 30th of Birke, Belleteyn !

It was spring.

It was the end of Birke.

It was Belleteyn !

Witcher Gerd and his brother in arms, from the same venerable school of witchers, were looking for work among the green, colorful flowered hills and plains of south-western Verden. Several miles from the closest village, Valigor. Three miles from the fortress of Nastrog and a couple more from the northern bank of the Yaruga. Both Gerd and Ksander were looking to get a contract, hoping to earn enough coin to reward themselves, at the end of the day, with some warm food and a few good drinks. Before reaching the southern shores of the Yaruga, crossing into the lands of Cintra.

Work didn't seem to find them so easily these days. Contrary to their expectations, since they left the Skillige Isles a few weeks ago, accompanied by another witcher that wintered at the keep of the bear. Junod of Belhaven. Who, against Ksander's desire to accompany him and Gerd into Cintra, chose to head north, having in mind to scour for a while the lands of Temeria, Redania, Kaedwen, and then head for Kovir. For he heard that there might be plenty of work for a witcher.

Ksander and Gerd travelled together since they stepped off their ship in the port of Bremervoord, Cidaris. Since their departure from the city, they had almost no proper witcher work, besides, a grave hag and an ekimmara outside Kerack. As if the lack of work was not enough, the emptiness of their stomachs and a half empty sacks of coins made themselves noticed with each passing day.

Until one fortunate day, when, as they got closer and closer to the crossing over the Yaruga, still some way away. They had found some work, witcher work. In the village or rather town, of Valigor.

Not far from the sea and the main road the small town flourished. It's streets and alleys that ran among the huts, were filled with men and women adorning the village's huts with the decorations for Belleteyn, consisting of crowns of hawthorn, rowan, primrose and hazel. As the holyday's festivities were only a few hours away.

Merchants had their carriages stopped on the edges of the street that pierced the town, cutting it in half. Selling from exotic southern food to trinkets to clothes to enchanted amulets, creams and mixtures advertised to hold magical properties, which once applied every morning keeps one's youthful looks intact from old age. Fishermen that were selling, well fish, lobsters and shells, while not far from them a few were selling books and maps, printed

in Oxenfurt. Not far from them was the stalls installed for the festivities, which were selling as if it was the 1st of Blathe.

A few steps away, was the Inn, dubbed The Lucky Squid, at which the beer and mead, vodka, dancing and music won't show any sign of stopping for at least two days. Beautiful women and girls sat at the tables with their beloved or their friends, drinking, laughing, kissing from time to time. Ksander quickly noticed them, hoping he'd be in luck to get to know one of them or several, tonight. All the while Gerd, was preoccupied with spotting the notice board, or see if one may approach them.

The witcher Gerd finally spotted the notice board and was later, approached by a woman, who seemed in a hurry to discuss her issue with the witcher. Of course Ksander's perverted way of thinking and damned eagerly, thirsty, thorough eyes couldn't unpeel themselves of the tempting beautiful lasses he carefully studied from head to toe. Smirking at every bounce of their breasts and sight of a girl's naked thigh, or when he spotted a nipple through their thin dresses.

Finally, both, had began to apply their trade...

Gerd took a contract regarding a missing fisherman and his son, not far from the village mentioned previously. While Ksander's contract was on a couple of harpies in the hills, close to the woods of Brokilon.

They both agreed to meet back at the village-town of Valigor, at The Lucky Squid, after receiving their payment.

It was late in the morning. The breeze coming from the ocean softly caressed the trees, dispersing the fog that had been settled upon the area, east, towards Brokilon.

Even though it was the beginning of summer, the temperature had been quite chilly during the mornings, while near noon it got warmer, and continued to do so until late afternoon and close to dusk.

'This might give me some cover while I look for the nest.', Ksander murmured.

The mist wasn't that thick, but, when combined with high grass, trees and bushes that were present on those hills, made it easier to approach.

The villagers mentioned that the nest should be beyond the second hill from the village, south-east. That did not help much as these hills weren't barren and covered with rocks, but with all sorts of shrubbery and little trees.

He and Gerd were glad that they found work. Harpies, were at least something, it didn't pay as good as a basilisk or a werewolf, but coin is coin. Even better welcomed on such draught, since they had not a single contract or any kind of work, after they left Kerack.

A mile from the place where he was told the nest should be, he found some old harpy kills, containing leftovers, such as bones and barely visible dried blood. Something that might

direct him towards the feeding grounds.

'Huh, a few weeks old...!', he said leaning from the saddle to look at the remains of food, scattered on the ground not far from the road. Suddenly his horse got spooked by something as she was sniffing the grass. 'Woah, Nymph, easy girl...!', he said calming his mare, 'It's just a snake.', he continued petting the horse's neck, as the little reptile slithered away through the grass with a hiss.

He got off the saddle and led his mare by the reins as they walked a couple steps up the hill. 'Blood...', he remarked as he kneeled down, searching the ground. 'Several hours old.'

Then, Nymph snorted as she looked toward the top of the hill as if she indicated Ksander to continue ascending it.

He continued to walk up the hill until he reached the top, where he found some more harpies. But dead, someone already slayed them.

The bodies had holes in them, one each, arrow made.

'Incredible accuracy, to take them out with one shot. Straight to the heart.', he said, inspecting the corpses. 'Elves ? Dryads ?', he continued, raising his head to look around. 'Whoever was here, left no tracks...!'

When he raised from the ground he saw one harpy gaining height from beyond the next hill. It was quickly shot and it began to fall down in the valley between the hills.

When he turned to look downhill. He saw six more harpies. And along with them a few bones and leftovers. This valley, was their feeding ground. But their nest could be either very close or very, very far.

He walked down hill to look for more clues.

'Huh, he or she took a trophy...!', said the witcher, as he approached a headless corpse. 'And probably continued on, up the next hill.'

He then moved to look at the harpy that just fell dead from the sky after being shot.

An arrow adorned with white feathers was impaled in the monster.

When he got up, a figure was watching him from the top of the hill. The one that shot the arrow, he thought.

He then continued uphill.

It nagged him the fact that there were no tracks. It could be one or a dozen elves or dryads...If he is to meet one of them or a few and get in a fight with them...

The dryads, aren't known to be fond of other people than their own. And besides the long black hair, he didn't look like an elf or a dryad at all.

As he advanced, he asked himself why would they come this far from Brokilon. It was still some distance till' the thick forest even began...

'I might try to ask them when we meet...!', he joked, as he got back in the saddle.

On the other side of Verden, Gerd was advancing towards the place where the fisherman usually left his boat.

The grass filled the land left and right, while as it advanced forward towards the sea, the grass diminished in height until it totally disappeared, being replaced by the sand of the beach. The waves hit the few rocks on the shore with power turning into a furious foam. On the sky which was filled with a couple of gray clouds flew a pack of gulls, further out on the sea, a few were fishing, while the others, were making a lot of fuss on the shore.

As Gerd kept approaching the shore, to his left, a small cabin emerged from beyond a few boulders on which sat a couple of gulls. Near it was an old boat, and a few unused nets, a few buckets. A horse without a saddle but with the bridle on, appeared to be wondering on the beach near the cabin. Must've been tethered near it. Got spooked by something and untied itself, and ran, then returned when whatever caused the scare left.

While he approached more and more things began to reveal themselves. Not far from the cabin, a bit to the left was a boat, leaned on one side. The waves of the sea where hitting the boat moving it further in land. As a few crows seemed to nick something near it. He couldn't see exactly what for the beach lowered a bit in that area.

When he got near the cabin he jumped out of the saddle. Taking his mare by the reins he continued onto the shore. The horse that walked around the cabin noticed the witcher and approached him. Gerd looked for bite or claw marks on the stallion, but it had no injuries, it managed to untie itself and run before whatever was here got to him. Gerd touched the stallion's muzzle, the horse was still nervous. Then as he looked towards the boat he saw what the crows where picking on. Another horse. Dead, for some time, hours at least.

The hooves prints of the horse that ran indicated that he went east, away from the beach. This one had less luck in evading it's predator. Near it was a trail of blood, suggesting it was carried. Had bite marks near the belly, and had a chunk of skin and muscle torn off near the ribs.

The witcher then pushed the boat which had been turned upside down by the waves. In it was little blood near the front, and nothing else besides that. If someone had returned to shore there should've been tracks. Unless he walked along the coastline, in which case the tracks had been washed away by the sea, but that didn't happen. If either one of the two fishermen had survived, he would've went back to the village, east. And there would've been tracks showing that.

Gerd, raised his arm and placed his hand above his eyes, scanning the open sea from ashore. He saw nothing but gulls, and waves that turned into foam before hitting the coast.

He then turned and walked to the cabin. It might be something in it, he thought. What if someone had returned to shore, and ran in the cabin shutting the door closed after him...

'Wait for me here...!', he spoke, petting the muzzle of his mare.

The cabin had been build on rocks that had been covered by sand carried by the wind in the winter. It had four stairs leading up a deck on which were present nets, barrels, planks and buckets. Near the door on a bench were resting a few fishing rods, and under it, were placed some loops of rope.

The door of the cabin wasn't locked. Inside several fishes were hanged to be dried. Others stood on a table, next to a few sharp knives, in the middle of the main chamber. They had been caught one or two days ago. There was nothing that looked fresh, not one catch from today. A few steps from the table to the right was a fireplace, and to its left a door that led into a room that had two beds in it. Near each was a candle, both half burned, sitting in a puddle of melted, dried wax.

'They left this morning. No one came back. Which means that the boat was brought to shore empty by the waves. They were attacked out on the sea...!', said Gerd to himself, as he slid his fingers over the dried wax on the cabinet near one of the beds.

Ksander, The Witcher, was following the little marks and patches in the grass he noticed from the saddle of his mare, and a trail of corpses. No tracks, beside the dead harpies.

In places that the grass was taller he noticed certain areas through were someone might've passed. It could've been a deer or a boar. The trees of Brokilon began to appear as he kept walking east. He kept doing so for more than an hour now.

And still no sign of the nest. It started to become irritating.

He also thought that maybe the elves or whatever shot down the harpies had already reached the nest. He also was sure that they had come from east to west. Leaving no harpy alive. If so, they must've reach the nest. The last corpse he had seen was freshly killed and the blood was still warm, proving his previous theory right. The more he advanced east, the closer he got to the one that shot down the harpies.

Soon, as he reached the top of another hill he saw the nest. And the ones that killed the harpies. Elves. To Ksander, this happened to be a relief, as they were not Dryads from Brokilon. However, by their number, it seemed that they probably had a camp somewhere near.

Ksander climbed down from the saddle and walked towards them. From near a couple of bushes appeared an elf-woman, taking a arrow out of the corpse of a harpy. She quickly raised her bow and with her left hand picked an arrow from her quiver.

Nymph, stopped and snorted. Ksander too.

'I don't want any trouble.', replied Ksander, showing his hand. 'I'm hunting the harpies as well.'

She didn't respond, nor did she lower her bow.

'I'm a witcher-'

'I know what you are !', she spoke. 'What is it that you want ?'

'I took a contract on these harpies. It seems you've done my work.', he said.

The elf frowned. 'So ?'

'Nothing, I don't have a problem with that.'

'Then be on your way !'.

'I must know that there are no more harpies in the area.'

'There aren't. We shot them down.'

'Is this your arrow ?', asked the witcher, pulling the arrow out of a pocket, from the saddle.

'Yes.', she answered. 'Give it back.'

'Sure.'. he said, throwing the arrow at her feet.

She was young, at least she looked so, she could've been older than he is, he thought. She had big green eyes and golden hair. She was thin, but looked strong. She kept biting her lower lip. She was beautiful, considered Ksander.

She didn't seem like she would let him check the nest. She didn't trust him. He understood that.

'At least burn the nest after you make sure all of them are dead. Alright ?'.

She replied with a nod.

'I'll need to take something, as proof.'

She lowered her bow and leaned right. 'Here.', she said, throwing the head of a harpy at Ksander's feet, then aimed her bow at the witcher again.

'Thanks.'. He then placed the head in a bag, and hanged it on the left side of the saddle. 'I'll go now.', he continued, taking one last look at the elf-woman. 'Farewell.'

She nodded, and looked without lowering her bow, as he got up in the saddle, and walked up to the top, until he passed beyond it.

Gerd found nothing of importance near or inside the cabin, so he decided to get out and ride along the coast to see if the flux didn't bring anything back from the sea. As he walked out of the cabin and off the deck, he noticed his mare had her head high up and was looking towards the sea, and kept digging in the sand with her front hoof, as he approached she looked at him then back to the foamy sea.

Yyn, snorted.

'What are you seeing, girl ?', said Gerd petting her neck.

Then he took a look for himself. Something big was flying towards the shore. Fast.

'Forktail !', he grunted slapping his mare's back. 'Run, Yyn. Dammit. Run !'.

It turned, wanting to follow the mare, but Gerd used his Aard sign and made it to change direction, causing it to land.

The beast landed with great speed and a high pitched shriek, blowing the sand under it, in all directions. Then it charged towards the witcher and right when it reached Gerd it turned, trying to hit him with its tail. Gerd rolled back and casted the sign of Aard once more. Making the forktail move to its right side and loose balance, at the same time Gerd charged, managing a cut near the head of the monster before it regained balance and attempted to bite.

It shrieked again, this time even louder then the last, clutching its mouth shut, then opened it once again and took a leap. Helped by the flapping of its wings it flew forward, toward the witcher, who leapt on one side and as the monster past him. He wanted to try a diagonal slash, but had to jump back, for the forktail made a one hundred and eighty turn swinging, dangling its tail, followed by another screech.

The witcher had the sword in both hands, holding it up near his chest, pointed at the monster, moving to the left, circling the draconid.

It stared at the witcher as it mirrored his movement, taking part in his dance, slowly stepping in a circle, presenting its talons, screeching and hissing.

With great speed it leapt once again, this time trying to grab Gerd between its razor sharp, foot talons. The witcher moved to his right side and casted the sign of Aard, making the forktail to fall on its side, while Gerd with one slash struck the monster across its thorax and its right wing. He quickly anticipated the monster's reaction and casted the sign of Quen. The tail of the draconid hit Gerd on his right side, while he turned the momentum given on a roll and managed to get back on his feet, quickly. And then casted the sign of Aard again, the forktail fell on its back. Yet, when the witcher approached it turned and swung its tail once again.

This time though, instead of charging, it quickly ran towards the foamy sea, screeching as it flapped its wings, attempting to flee.

'You're not gettin' away !', growled the witcher, watching as the forktail was flying straight towards the horizon. As soon as he saw it turn, flying along the coast, he whistled. Yyn, his

mare ran as quick as she could towards the witcher. Who jumped in the saddle in pursuit of the monster along the shore.

The forktail began to approach the shore as it leaned on its left side, dripping blood from its left wing. Meaning, it couldn't keep on flying like that much longer.

The beast managed to fly at the same height for a few more minutes along the shore then descended with a shriek. Not far from a few cliffs and rock formations, cut by the sea's violent waves which were braking with a loud churn, turning into a pudgy foam. As east of them was a scarce forest, which hugged the cliffs.

The den, thought the witcher. As he shook the reins of his mare, galloping at full speed, along the shore. Creating a trail of floating sand crystals behind him. Yyn shook her head and neighed as she raced the beast to its den. With the sea at her right and the green grass to her left and the sand beneath her hooves. She gained speed, the beach echoed as she struck the sand with her hooves.

He soon reached the cliffs, while the forktail remained behind as it kept on descending, and shrieking due to the injury to its wing.

On those cliffs, Gerd had located as he previously thought, the forktail's den.

As he approached he saw the forktail's young ones. Around two weeks old. Near them, two bodies, half eaten. The fisherman and his son. Several hours dead.

Gerd got out of the saddle as the forktail approached the nest. It was weakened. It had lost a lot of blood. As it didn't manage to even land properly, plunging head first only a few meters from the nest. It remained down. It couldn't gather the power to lift itself from the ground. Each time it tried, the forktail fell back down. Hissing and shrieking.

Gerd took his silver sword out of the scabbard, and grabbed it with both his hands, striking the monster's neck, chopping the head of the forktail clean off. He then proceeded toward the young ones. And stabbed each in the thorax.

He then looked at the two corpses. From the wounds and the look of the bodies. The son was still alive when the forktail brought him to the nest while his father died on their way here. The fisherman's son, died while the little ones were feeding. Horrible way to go.

By the time Gerd got back to the town of Valigor, a few bonfires were already lit, the flames crackling, hissing and sizzling, with passion.

He soon approached the hut of the contract issuer.

'Witcher !', spoke the woman, as she saw the witcher approach the hut, walking across the road from the hut on the other side. Her face slowly turned pale when she saw no one else but him. 'They're dead, aren't they ?', she continued with a low voice. 'What killed them ?'.

'A forktail. Took them while they were fishing this morning.'.

'I knew something had happened...!', her voice began to brake, two tears ran down her face. 'I knew it. They never been late. Never. I've lost yet another brother...'. she wiped the tears with her hand, then sighed. 'Well...!', she continued, wiping her tears. 'Thank you for avenging them, and cuttin' that beast down. You surely saved others from having a similar fate. Here's your reward.', she said pressing her lips, and sniffing. 'What about their remains ? Was...Is there anything left ? I want to give them a proper burial.'

'They're up on the cliff near the hills, south of the cabin.'

'That cursed place. I'll send my husband and his brother to bring them home. Thank you.', she replied, with a sigh.

'Farewell.', Gerd said, with a nod, then left the front yard of the woman's hut. Heading towards The Lucky Squid Inn.

'Gerd ! Here !'. Yelled Ksander, waving. As he had found a table, which was filled with food, and drinks.

'Hey...!', said Gerd as he sat down across the table. 'Got any coin ?'.

'Sure did.', replied Ksander, proudly presenting Gerd his pouch of ducats. 'You ?'.

'Same.', he answered placing his pouch on the table as well.

'Well, this ought to be enough for at least a week. Don't you think ?'.

Gerd nodded.

'Hah !', yelled Ksander, raising his hand, holding a tankard of beer. 'For further good fortune !',

Gerd did the same, then both gulped down the contents.

As the dusk approached.

The few remaining unlit bonfires began to be lighted one by one.

The fire crackled and sizzled with power and passion.

Gerd was alone.

For Ksander had left to find some lass or lasses he could be with during the night of Belleteyn, and suggested Gerd, to do the same.

As Gerd stood up from the table he noticed a familiar face at one of the tables not far from his.

She noticed his gaze and gazed back at him, smiling. It was the witcheress, Ayanna of Liddertal.

Gerd hadn't seen her in some years. More exactly, since the first time they met, during the job he was invited to do with her and Letho of Gulet, in Nilfgaard.

She did not change one bit. Gerd thought. She wore a black cloak, and under it, from what he noticed, she wore a black shirt unbuttoned near the top half, no armor, beyond which, hanged, a few fingers above her breasts, the medallion from her witcher guild. Her hair was loose, pushed behind her right ear, black, curled towards the tips.

He thought of going to her table, but quickly abandoned that thought. She had not been too fond of him, back then. Ksander would've gone to the conclusion that she had found no interest of having sexual encounters with any men. Making her the kind of woman that was attracted by the representatives of her sex. But, from all the things Ksander spew, a very few, one should take as advice.

Thus, instead of wasting her time and his with pointless, trivial discussions that would bore her to death. He left her be. And went behind the Inn to relive himself.

While he drained his bladder, from all the vodka, beer and other alcoholic beverages he ingested. His mind kept sliding to whatever he didn't want to think about. Ayanna, being one of them.

'That's why I don't drink.', he muttered to himself, going back to the table.

As he reached the table, and sat down, he poured himself some more mead.

'Gerd.', a soft voice came from the left, as a light hand fell on his left shoulder.

He turned. 'Yes...!'

It was her.

She smiled.

'It's nice to see you.', she added, with a charming smile. 'May I join you ?'.

Gerd nodded. As she sat down next to him at the table.

'Same.', he replied, turning towards her. 'What are you doing around these parts ?'.

'Work, mostly...', she said. 'But, if you ask anyone else, they would say I just waste time. As I've been traveling with a group of elves for several weeks now.', she continued, braking a boiled potato and taking a small slice to her mouth. 'One of them, mentioned to have seen a witcher, who wore a bear medallion. I don't know any other witcher from the school of the bear, but you.'.

'It wasn't me.'.

'I know.', she replied, smiling. 'You were hunting a forktail near the coast.'.

'The elves told you that ?'.

'No. Heard people talk about it.', she smiled, as her eyes looked straight into Gerd's without hesitation of looking away. 'I heard only rumors about you throughout the years. Some said you died, during a job near Vengerberg. Good to know you haven't.'

'Well...It took me some time to recover.', he replied, then drank from the tankard. 'How about you ? Haven't heard much...'

She chuckled. 'I'd rather talk about the beast that almost killed you...'

'The rumors didn't mention ?'.

'You see...', she began turning on the bench, then leaned towards him. 'They say different things. One says that it was a bruxa, another a foul dragon, and my favorite...A knight in shining armor, serving under the duchess of Toussaint, seeking justice in the name of a fair maid, whose honor you've wounded. So, which one is true ?'.

'Neither.', Gerd answered, taking another sip from the tankard. 'It was but a mere archgriffin, a female. Which I tried to kill, but a daft knight believed it was cursed. As he had a hypothesis built on a soothsaying given by an old wench as a young boy. Who foretold the he'd cross paths with love, at heart a young woman, yet at shape, her human form would be cursed, into a winged creature, between the likes of an eagle and a lion. Thus, he insisted that the archgriffin was the result of a curse, which he wanted to lift as it was his destiny to free the young maid trapped within. I refused, saying that I didn't give a shit about his destiny, thus I had to fight the archgriffin while trying not to kill the knight, who in turn, tried to kill me. So...'

'You've slayed the beast and the knight almost slayed you ?', she asked, while flaying off a thin slice of cooked meat from the upper lair of a chicken's breast.

'Not really...As the knight further insisted, that the archgriffin won't harm us if we lay down our weapons, positioning himself between me and the archgriffin. Pleading for forgiveness, as he dropped his sword. At which time, the archgriffin let out a high pitched cry and charged, the daft knight in his tin armor pissed himself or simply didn't move, and the archgriffin sunk its talons through the knight's torso, then slammed his corpse against a tree.'

'And ?', she added, washing down the chicken breast with wine.

'The damned thing spat acid, I rolled, it charged, one of the claws ripped my shoulder pad, and messed my left shoulder pretty nicely...', Gerd replied.

'Well, I must say, that the rumors are far more entertaining. And slightly more amusing.', she said with a sigh, biting from the other half of the boiled potato.

'Most of times they are...'

She smiled. 'I am surprised you didn't ask me about it, yet.'

'Ask about what exactly ?'.

She softly chuckled. 'Why am I traveling with a band of elves...'

'It's not as if I didn't want to, but alright...Why are you traveling with a band of elves ?', Gerd asked with a snicker.

'Well, to waste the time...!', she replied, taking another sip from her tankard. 'Mostly...!'

'Is it a contract ? Elves rarely hire witchers, at least in my experience...!'

'No.', Ayanna replied, taking another bite from the boiled potato. 'I know some of them. They're friends...!', she continued, while Gerd reached for a chicken leg.

'I been meaning to ask...!', Gerd said, before taking a bite from the chicken leg. 'Is there any witcher work, down south ?'.

'Haven't heard, but there must be, some witcher work...!'

'Didn't you and the elves travel from south ?'.

'We did...But, I didn't look for any kind of witcher related work.'.

'So you're retired ? What happened ?', he subtly joked.

She let out a gentle sigh. 'Nothing. I just...Found the life on the path rather dull in the last couple of years. I don't know how you do it. How can you just Walk the Path, year after year, day after day, and remain sane.', she scoffed, looking towards the left side of the Inn, where a couple of young men and women, attempted to set alight a bonfire, then turned to Gerd. 'Didn't you ever wish to make something else of yourself ? Something other than a witcher ?'.

'Haven't really gave it a thought to be honest. Besides, become what ?'.

'Anything really. Anything but a witcher. I mean all that coin you hoard for better gear, could buy you a home. A farm. Something to call yours, something other then swords and armor...!', she said, gazing into Gerd's eyes. 'You've never thought about that ? Never wondered what else could you do ?'.

'No.'.

She chuckled, biting her lower lip.

'Ayanna. I get it.', he continued, placing his hand over hers. 'It's different for you. The life of a witcher, isn't as fulfilling for you, as it is for me, or any other witcher from your guild. And it can't be. And you don't have to do it if you don't want to, and that's fine. Don't beat yourself over it, honestly, it isn't worth it.'.

She didn't look away, nor did she move her hand away from his.

'One's search for purpose in life, it's a difficult task nonetheless. For me being a witcher, liberates me from ever having such concerns. I'm good at it. How many people can say their good at something and actually mean it ? A handful, perhaps, and most do it because of their arrogance. In truth I don't know if any of them mean it. But a witcher, is either efficient or incompetent. The difference is the latter ends up dead. Ayanna, you are unique. You lack

certain mutations, yet you're still as efficient...', he resumed, as he moved his hand away, then drank from the tankard. 'If you ask me, you're free to do whatever you want. Yet, the most difficult part is, finding out what you need.'

'But, I wanted this...I wanted to go through the administration of mutagens. Through the pain, and the excessive training. I wanted the life of a witcher...', she began, with a sigh. 'And now I started to resent it. Even wish I hadn't chose to go through all of it. Which would mean, I'd rather choose death over being a witcher...'

'You were a child. Of course you wanted to live, to learn and to see what else this world can offer.', Gerd replied, gazing into her eyes, which were filling up with tears. 'I recall being curious as well. Even though, I tried skipping the daily and dull sword and bestiary lessons, which Mousar punished with even more sign, stance and dummy practice, which I tried blowing off as well. Which in turn, he used to discipline with a couple of strong whacks over the head and a dense lecture.'

She chuckled, as then a tear escaped her grasp, and rolled down her left cheek.

They didn't say anything for a while. Music and laughs, the sizzling of the trees and the roar of the bonfires played tirelessly in the night and around them.

'So...Are you having any plans for tonight ?', asked Gerd, gazing upon her.

She chuckled, pushing a few locks of hair behind her ear.

'How did you- Hm. No, I do not.', she responded after a while.

'It's close to dusk.', said Gerd, turning his head looking at the orange disc that was close to touch the horizon. 'Come with me.'

'Where ?', she asked standing up, while Gerd took three bottles from the table.

'For a walk. Grab two more bottles.'

Gerd moved through the busy streets of the town towards the stables where his mare was. Ayanna with one bottle of vodka and another of wine, was following behind him.

The music rang loudly on the street leading to the stables. Girls, women and men were dancing around the bonfires, that crackled with great flames. For, it was the holyday in which was celebrated the return of summer, lust, passion, and love.

It was the Last Day of Birke and the First Night of Blathe.

It was Belleteyn.

The yells of joy where echoing far from the town, on the hills around, bonfires burned with might and pride, their flames where vicious, raising high towards the sky. On which a few stars along with a dim figure of the moon, began to show, as the sun kept descending beyond the horizon.

Gerd quickly saddled his mare and took her out of the stable. Jumped on the saddle and extended his hand to Ayanna. 'Come on. Get up.'. She took Gerd's hand and climbed in the saddle.

'Where are we going ?', she asked as they left the Valigor's hills.

'The sea. I want you to see the dusk there.', he answered, shaking the reins.

As they bolted on the back of Yyn, through the trees and the grass that filled the fields west of Valigor.

Finally, they got out of the grass lands and reached the shore of the Great Sea.

Seagulls slid their claws through the water.

As the red sun was half sunk into the deep red, foamy sea.

The waves grew calm all of a sudden.

They sat down on a blanket Gerd took from the saddle, and placed it upon the sand. Watching as the waves ruptured against the shore. They sat like that for a while. In silence. Only the gulls squeaks and the sound of the waves were present.

'I used to watch the sundown each night, back at the Keep. It always calmed me. It's sight.', he began, without taking his eyes away from the horizon. Nor did she. 'I can only imagine how you feel...!'

She sluggishly moved her eyes and looked down at her hands. 'I know.'.

They remained silent after that for a while.

The waves kept bashing against the rocks ashore, and the sun kept sinking into the sea, the gulls kept squawking and the soft breeze kept on blowing.

She moved closer to Gerd, and leaned her head on his shoulder.

Taking his palm into hers.

'I got to like you, in the end...', she said, almost whispered. 'Back then. I didn't tell you. I had no idea what you thought of me. I should've told you.'.

'I didn't deserve it. Not back then. I was troubled. I had things to figure out.'.

She didn't respond, he set his eyes on her. He noticed that she gently frowned. A black lock of hair slid down from her shoulder. Her jaw muscles tensed. Her eyes were cold, sharp. She looked down, again.

'What about now ? Have you figured your things out ?', she asked, raising her eyes, watching the sea.

He felt her every breath. Probably her heart beat too.

'I, do not know. Age, alone. Doesn't bear gifts of wisdom. But it offers perspective.'

She was silent.

Her palm began to sweat.

'Yes or no ?', she asked looking toward the sea.

Gerd turned his head. He felt her warm breath on his face. His right hand moved to touch her thigh, and advanced upwards to her hip. While her right hand moved to his cheek and gently proceeded towards the back of his head. He softly touched his lips to hers. Her breath quickened. While her left hand began to unbutton Gerd's jacket, as she leaned on her back as Gerd's left hand took off her shirt. Her skin gave a sensual scent and tasted sweet. Her pale, blue eyes glittered in the semi-darkness. She closed her eyes. As Gerd moved his hand down her neck, following the chain of her medallion. Moving her shirt aside, his attention shifted, as he cupped her right breast in his hand. All the while his lips lowered from hers, downwards, with gentle kisses down her neck, shoulders, and breasts, as she let out a soft moan.

A few good minutes later, silence. The gulls left, the sun had completely set, and the stars shined above them. Only the sound of the waves remained.

She stood on her left side with her head on Gerd's shoulder. With his right arm arched around her back.

Naked. Covered by the blanket. Looking at the stars.

Visse gead'tocht gaedeen. Vatt'ghern

.XVII. Visse gead'tocht gaedeen. Vatt'ghern.

*'He was among the emperor's highest ranked men,
A valuable piece, in a game of chess.
Serving under the flag depicting a Golden Sun.
Never had he appeared on the board,
Yet, he knew all the moves...
What was he ?'*

The favor that Rourterggest had asked Gerd to do, involved the 'unfortunate vanishing' of a few men that belonged to a gang from the upper side of Novigrad. That had planned a meeting with a mole from the south, who for half a year had gained vital information.

The information contained routes used by Verner's men, secret stashes, hideouts and names of the informants within and outside the city of Novigrad. The information could be the spark of another gang war, and with the ship leaking, Verner and his gang might sink. A result that two other gangs would suffer from, and others would take advantage of. The dwarfs were among the ones to benefit, if they get their hand on the port side, their business with weapons and forge ingredients would dominate the others in Novigrad. While under Verner, they are kept in check.

Frances 'advised' the witcher to leave no man nor elf or dwarf or halfling alive. And scorch their remains to ashes. This was not only a clean up job, but a message, to all those who think of trying such methods. That it won't work, not against this gang, and their leader, Zedt Verner.

Frances couldn't have chosen, someone more fit, to complete this task but Gerd, The Witcher.

Who had once a drawn line that he thought he'd never cross. Believed in honor, and a fair fight, knowing that there wasn't any. But, that was many years ago, more exactly around the time he barely had a few years since he left the keep of the School of the Bear, practicing his profession on the path. Nevertheless as he advanced in age, he realized honor is for those that want to reach the grave faster than the others. Honor is for dumb knights and stupid men, philosophizing about purpose in life, a healthy mind and life without sin. For ballads and poetry, stories of heroes and legends. Not for witchers, who are no material for legends or heroes. A witcher is what all the people think and always thought. A cold hearted killer, emotionless, remorseless, with one purpose, which is, to kill monsters.

For if a sword could begin to think about becoming a stick, it would lose it's sharpness.

If a fish would believe it could live on land, it would lose it's life.

Thus, a witcher mustn't believe it is something that he isn't.

But he most of the time considered himself more human than the ones that lacked his mutations. He saw more humans kill humans than the times he killed one himself. He considered, that as one gets older he either accepts the hard truth or live in a self made illusion. That the humans are no worse then what they, themselves, call monsters. For the monsters didn't start wars for territories. Didn't reduce villages to smoking ashes, killed children and women, raped, hanged, decapitated non-humans and burned mages on pyres outside of their cities. Killed for coin, pleasure or out of jealousy.

A monster, kills for food. It kills out of fear or anger. It kills to feed it's offspring. It kills to protect.

As a human would.

The world won't, ever, run out of monsters. There will always be something for a witcher to kill...

'Now that all the important stuff is resolved. I'd like to address a matter that has caught the ears of few gentlemen within this very chamber.', began a man, dressed with a cobalt blue jacket, same color trousers, wearing a hat tilted near the front, of the same color. Standing across the table from the dwarf, Viggil Bronxdur and next to him, a human, Velwen 'The Sly' Wilkken. On the left end of the table sat Zetd Verner, while to the right Albert Nomme, a redanian.

The room was illuminated by two lanterns placed on each side of the table.

'Hah !', snorted the dwarf, 'What might that be, I wonder !'.

'We should wait for Egil, he walked outside to take a piss...', spoke a Albert.

The sound of seagulls, the yelling and swearing of the sailors, of hammers hitting planks, churn of barrels and talks of the passing merchants were uninterrupted outside. They were in a warehouse at the port.

In Zetd Verner's territory.

Egil Yngvarrkir, a Cintrian. returned to the table. He wore a black tunic with green details around his shoulders and belt. Sat down and leaned on the back rest of the chair.

Around the table were the six gang leaders of Novigrad's underworld.

'Now, we can talk.', resumed the man called Albert.

'What's this about, Raben ?', asked the dwarf, 'Why have you kept it till' now ?'.

'Having something special to announce ?', Egil joined on the conversation, leaning onto the table, biting from a piece of bacon, as he gazed upon the man.

The man cleared his throat and placed his left hand on the table, hitting his fingers one after the other onto the table's surface.

'I'd wager, few of you heard of Gerd, a witcher, from Skillige.', Reban continued. A couple of men in the room quickly fixated their eyes on Verner. Egil made a smile out of his thin lips while he chewed on the fat bacon. The dwarf crossed his hands, while the others just stared.

'I heard of him...', said Egil, then spat. 'He's a tough son of a wench. Saw him in Attre many years ago. It was after he finished a contract on some blood sucker. He stopped at the Zebo's, Rebis Inn, where some daft knight and his mates, picked a fight with him over something that involved the honor of that blood sucking whore. Though that prick and his pals, were covered head to toe in armor they got punched and kicked out the door into the street like some bloody tramps. The damned idiots didn't even get the chance to reach for their swords. Two days later, nine bodies were found, east, outside the city. The folk livin' around those parts, said the witcher made camp there, and that the ploughin' idiots attacked him during the night.', he continued, stuffing the remained bacon in his mouth. 'What about him ?'

'Your too young to know this Egil. But, he used to be a good pal of Verner's. Isn't that right ?', Reban resumed, looking at Verner.

'That's right.', said Verner as he stopped fiddling with one of his rings and leaned toward the table, into the light of the lantern. His pointy chin, small lips, with a scar running from the left side of his nose, diagonally to the right side of his chin, expressed a vile smile.

He spoke in a low, rough tone, as if he had a sore throat.

'Didn't you use him during your latest major success ? Years ago, when you managed to impose your control over this port, eh ?', asked Reban.

'Used ? No. I merely had something of interest to him. He helped. I gave him what he wanted. That's all. A favor for a favor. Nothing more.', he paused, looking at Reban, moving his eyes on each of the individuals that sat at the table. Then, smiled again. 'You all feel unease ? Fear ? The voices in the back of your skull give you troublesome, desperate ideas ? That I might use him, once again, to cut one or several of you out ?', replied Zetd with a terrifying smirk, as he paused for a while. Glancing over those that sat at his table. 'I won't. Why break the formation ? Gentlemen. We are doing a tremendous work as we are.'. He glanced over his partners. 'Trust me. You won't have to expect such a threat from me...', he resumed at last.

'Well...', began Albert. 'Glad to know. With that, this meeting has been concluded. See you next week, gentlemen.'

'About bloody time. My arse began to hurt from this damned chairs !', said the dwarf.

Reban, walked to shake Zetd's hand. 'I didn't.', he whispered in his ear, then walked away.

The last to remain in the room was Albert Nomme, he walked towards Verner, shook his hand, and left, closing the door.

Verner's lieutenant approached. 'The witcher. He's on his way to the location of Yngvarrkir's mole.'

'Good.'

'Isn't this affecting the trust of the other bosses ?'.

'Trust ? They didn't 'trust' a single thing of what I said.', he replied, then chuckled. 'Smart. They have a couple of good reasons not to.', Zetd said, grabbing his cane from near the door jamb.

'What if-'.

'No if's about this, kid. A war wouldn't be bad. Most of these bastards must end up dead. By my hand or someone else's. The more this 'peace' lasts the more they become like rabid dogs. Inpatient for the sight and smell of blood. Constant pressure is good to be imposed, but if it last's to long...', he paused, 'It loses it's wanted effect.'

'No one lives long enough, they say with great sorrow in their voices.', began the man closest to the fire. 'But, none says anything about deserving that never ending life. Not realizing that such a thing can have horrible repercussions on ones mind. And why would they ? Such a wish comes from the greed and selfishness one harbors in his rotten heart. Everyone must accept death. Welcome it. Fear, is only human, they also mumble, huh...', he paused, taking a drink from a flask he had near him, then leaned on a log. After gulping down whatever the flask contained, he wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and resumed, 'I don't fear it. I'm tired of this miserable life. Death, is a gift from the gods themselves. One that I will receive with open arms-'.

'Quit murmuring shit, Moe. There is not one man, dwarf, nor elf that I know able to beat you...'

'Able ? Hah !', Moe replied, throwing a few branches on the fire.

'Who's that ?', asked another man, standing up.

'I don't recall Egil saying something about sending additional help. Do you ?'.

A figure on the back of a horse appeared to approach the camp, not far outside the walls of Novigrad.

'A messenger ?', another asked standing up.

The horse walked slowly towards the camp, from east, on the road that circled the camp.

Behind Moe, who leaned on a log of a pin tree, was a shed.

The others stood up to greet the one approaching.

As the horse walked out of the shadows casted by the trees around the small road leading to the shed, it's rider revealed himself to be dead. His head clean cut from one side to the other, hanging on a thin slice of skin and muscle, towards his left side.

'Fuck !', said the closest, to the approaching horse, which suddenly stopped, making the corpse that stood in the saddle fall.

Moe got up. 'Who did this ? That's Willy.'

'Yeah, we fuckin' noticed, Moe...', replied another. 'Shit !'.

As if it got spooked, the horse neighed and raised on it's hind legs, turned and ran.

The two men that stood near him fell on their bottoms.

'Damned, stupid horse !', yelled one of them.

'Ah, poor Willy...', said Moe, approaching. 'He was supposed to get some booze...' he continued. 'The-'.

'Moe ? You're alright-', he didn't get to finish his question for an arrow pierced his skull, the tip emerging through his forehead. Moe had his windpipe severed and drowned in his own blood. While the other three that remained got stabbed in the back by a sword or had their neck sliced.

None managed a slight noise or a call for help.

All of a sudden the fire withered.

The door of the shed was blown to splinters. Inside, a scream, a thud. Then silence.

Followed by the sound of a sword being placed back in the sheath.

The sound of crickets.

The dead corpses that laid outside, were dragged, one by one, inside the shed.

Then, the inside of the shed was set aflame.

Soon the whole wooden construction began to be devoured by the raging flames.

Until nothing was left...

But ashes.

Oasis

.XVIII. Oasis.

Almost, there, near the beginning of the trees...

Almost, out of the endless sea of sand.

Almost, able to taste the fresh water.

Almost, closer with each breath,

To The Oasis.

With the mercenary Galodo Frock once again in shackles, the small Zerrikanian caravan traveled on through the night, as they needed to reach the lands of Gawa and the oasis there, before daylight. As the water supplies were very low, they had to use it smartly, and effectively, therefore, not making camp and advancing during the night to avoid the scorching temperatures during the day and any sunlight, seemed the best way to do it.

At the head of the group led by Biua, was Gerd, riding along side the Zerrikanian woman. Slurping the remaining drops of water from his flask. He could've been as tired as the other men and women in the zerrikanian group that transported Galodo, but he didn't feel like it. His eyes watched with an irritating grin the sun which began to ascend from the east. Cracking the darkness of the night with a red line across the horizon, and the slight semi-circle rising from beyond the dunes of sand that began to disappear, leaving place to the roasted grass and dirt so far.

'Don't like the sun, do you?', asked Biua, slowing down a bit, so Gerd could catch up.

'Not one bit.', he replied, without taking his eyes off the less than half arising ball of fire.

'Ha ! After all those days in the desert, I thought you got used to it...!'

'I did. But, that doesn't mean I got to like it...!'

'Good enough.', she responded, with a smile. Then turned her head and shoulders and looked at the back of the caravan.

'How far are we from the oasis?'

'Not far. Look ahead. The grass, is getting livelier, greener and left of the path, ahead, a few trees.', she said, pointing ahead. 'That means we are close. We should be there before sunrise.'.

From behind, a woman warrior quickened her horse's steps and slowed when she reached Biua's right side.

'Should we sent scouts ?', the woman asked.

'Yes. Tell them to prepare and await further instructions.'

The woman nodded and pulled the reins of the horse, and stopped on the side of the road.

'Witcher.'

'Hmm ?'.

'What do you plan to do once we reach the village ?', asked Biua, with a serious tone, not taking her eyes from the path.

'I'm not sure...'

'You had your chance to have him dead in that cave. Why didn't you ? You would've been on your way back to the Blue Mountains now. Don't get me wrong, I appreciated the help.', answered Biua, now looking at him, through the corners of her eyes. 'I don't know what Veya told you, hence my previous questions. I think you understand...'

'She told me why you want him. And she made clear what would happen if I were to kill him before he payed his debt.'

'Honor then. I didn't think your kind still had it, you know...'

'Mhm.'

'You'll probably enjoy your stay in our lands as most foreigners do. I don't know how you'll apply your trade here, though. We do solve most of the vermin problems ourselves, leaving a very few things a witcher could take care of...', she said, turning her head left and right, scanning the path ahead. as they entered the Qahgon Savanna, lion territory.

'Two fresh kills south-east !', yelled a man, behind Gerd and Biua, looking through a spyglass.

Biua extended her left arm towards the man, who handed her the spyglass. 'Lion kills most likely...', she said before looking. 'A lion and a man.'

'One of ours ?', asked the man.

'No. Foreigner.'

As they came closer to the place the corpses were spotted Gerd added a few more details to the case as they past by.

'A hunter. Redanian from the color of his tunic, 25-30 years of age. He must've come here looking for lion pelts.', added Gerd.

'He had no quick death, nor painless...!', continued Biua. 'That's what happens when you hunt alone, especially lions.'

'It requires at least four to five people. One or two with a bow and the rest with poison tipped spears.', said the man behind Biua and Gerd. 'We don't hunt them like we used to do a few decades ago, when they used to get close to the villages north of here. Their numbers increased in the last decade, but they haven't extended their territory yet.'

'So you don't hunt them ?'

'There is no need to.', answered Biua. 'We have plenty of leather left from the time we did. Also, we mustn't hunt them to extinction. Our land is a gift and we are here to tend to it. Keep it in balance.'

The few hours left of the night quickly evaporated under the immense heat that began to rise with each moment the sun travelled west upon this part of the Blue Mountains.

Approximately an hour after sunrise, the scouts sent ahead by Biua, had visual confirmation of their destination, the Oasis of Gawa, where the rest of the Zerrikanian caravan waited for them to reach this green piece of paradise, since their arrival eight days ago.

Now, the fate of The Mouse, Galodo Frock, had been sealed. From the oasis were just a few more hours to travel to the closest town, and city, Yolwelkairr.

The change of scenery became breathtaking. Green shrubbery dominated the area, filled with large trees full of colorful singing birds, that shaded the ponds of water of a small delta. On one of it's banks, filled by a large number of blue and pink birds and wild animals similar to the western deer and a few white striped horses were quenching their thirst. In the middle, massive hunks of fat and greyish skin, floating around opening their large mouths. The grand lake was formed in this region by the great river Naa'l, that from here flows south-east, and drains into a sea, east of here. A river that brings life to all the places it flows through, managing to survive the great heat of the deserts, the sharp edges of the canyon rocks among which it drills it's path, for centuries.

No wonder all who visited those places remained speechless at the view of such grandiose splendors.

A land like no other, that's what Zerrikania is.

The group of almost thirty zerrikanians that captured the fleeing mercenary finally had reached the camp, set along the western shore of the Naa'l, being greeted by their brethren, who eagerly awaited their return.

When seeing that Gerd was among those who returned, the camp began to chant something in zerrikanian, over and over again.

'Witcher !', said Veya, approaching. 'You're a sight for sore eyes. I heard you were vital during the capture of The Mouse. Anyway, I bet you're tired ? Get some rest, we'll talk after about your journey here and further.'

'Fine.', Gerd replied, as he jumped from the saddle.

'Witcher !', said Maa approaching from behind, slapping Gerd on the back. 'I couldn't believe it when they told me you were riding at the head of the group. You did well, there will surely be a reward for you when we reach Yolwelkairr. But for now, rest, drink, eat, enjoy yourself with whatever you please. We'll leave at nightfall.'

'Thank you, Maa. I will try to.'

'By the way, Tara wants to talk with you.', said Veya. 'She's at the main tent, to your left, near that tree.', she continued, indicating a tall tree with a large and tall trunk and long branches.

Gerd took his belongings from the saddle of his new horse, a zerrikanian stallion, called by the locals, Ku'n'Kyra. which means thunder in the old language.

He walked towards the tall tree.

He saw Tara. She was holding a rugged journal in her left hand, glancing over it as she stood near an old table next to a few silver chains hanging by a rusty nail struck in one of the tent's pillars.

'Tara...', said Gerd, causing Tara to slip out of her day dream. 'Veya said you wanted to talk ?'.

'Not really.', she answered. 'I need you to tell me something...'

'What ?'

'Come here. Take a look at this...', replied the zerrikanian woman, handing the journal she was previously perusing upon, to the witcher.

'What about it ?', asked Gerd uncertain of what he was supposed to add to the conversation.

'The language, is it...'

'It's Elder Speech.'

'Can you read it ?'

'I could try to make sense of what it contains, but, it will translate a bit rough...', he answered, scratching the bridge of his nose. 'I'm not fluent in elder speech...'

'Don't you want to know who's the owner ?', she asked, getting closer to Gerd, touching shoulders.

'I'd guess an elf ?'

'No. I found it in The Mouse's satchel...'

'I doubt it's his...', said the witcher turning a few pages and stopped on one that had a drawing. 'That's Dol Blathanna...'

'What is that ?', asked Tara.

'A piece of land, a kingdom. The Valley of Flowers. It was the territory of Elves a few decades ago. Now, it belongs to the humans. Living in the high mountains, the elves are at war with the humans. Many die shot by elven arrows, when venturing in their territory...!'

'The Valley of Flowers...', murmured the woman. 'Have you been there ?'

'A few times. Beautiful lands. Wait...!'

'What ?', she answered smiling.

'You know all this. You can read it...!'

'I do. I wanted to see your reaction.'

'Are you showing off ?', asked Gerd, turning towards the woman.

She smiled.

'A bit. Come with me. I found some other interesting things.'

The witcher did follow the zerrikanian woman inside the tent, where she presented him a few more of the things she had found in Galodo's satchel. A few letters regarding business, debtors, targets, money flow, accounts, hidden stashes and routes. A few drawings of a building, with scribbled notes near the edges, surely plans for a future heist, including a list of nicknames of the team he planned to rob the house of a man named Almred Von Yenth, in Vengerberg.

The Mouse, had many schemes thought ahead, following the massacre of Spalla.

Shame he won't get to enjoy the spoils from any of them...

As the time past quickly, midday approached.

Gerd, left the tent of the zerrikanian woman, in search for a place to rest his tired flesh and bones.

He found a shaded place, both in the morning and during the day. Under a big tree, very similar to an oak. Where he tied and hanged from two lower branches a piece of cloth, making a hammock. He then, sat in the bed he'd made, watching the sky through the branches of the tree. The sun hadn't reach the middle of the sky yet, as it casted its light through the branches. creating an orange haze.

He then slowly closed his eyes, took a deep breath and fell instantly asleep.

Gerd, slept until the sky completely darkened, and when he woke up, a large number of bioluminescent bugs started to fly around the large tree.

He was awake and so was the rest of the camp. So, he dismantled his hammock, and walked towards Tara's tent. Where Biua, Maa and Veya were standing around the outside table.

Place of Power

.XIX. Place of Power.

'In my young age, I heard this story once...', began the foreigner who was the closest to the fire. The rest stood behind him in a semi-circle. A few were holding hands, others leaned on the shoulder of their lover, friend, sister or brother, while the rest sat upright or laid down, resting their heads on a piece of folded cloth or their leather satchel...

A tender breeze caressed the flames into a hypnotic dance.

'...Of a man that lost everything. His wife, children, father and mother, sister and brother, anyone he could call a friend. He even lost himself, but, that came only after he had lost everyone else. Loneliness does that to the mind. We have an identity due to society, meaning we owe it to the people around us. Identity in this context means our role in all of this, our place in the greatest creation. We, as the flames, curve and adapt to the movement of these outside stimulants that are present all around us. We change. We become...', he continued, looking at the night sky, filled with thousands of stars.

'Without identity and those stimulants to steer us towards something...We are lost alike the man I previously mentioned. A sailor on a deserted ship, floating adrift on an endless sea.'

Those standing behind him were his students. Of various ages, they had come to the legendary hill not far from the city of the Golden Dragon. Yolwelkairr, for it was the day, the Zerrikanian people celebrated the end of the 12th month of their '9th Cycle' in their calendar. In other words, the new year. A few of those present that night were scholars, that spent the whole year away from home, wondering the cities and towns, villages and deserts, plains, caves and ruins of the majestic Zerrikanian lands gathering information, exploring and discovering new species of plants and wild life. Including other disciplines, such as archeology, geology, astronomy, gastronomy, philosophy and art, to name a few.

If one would search, one would surely find a few tales that tell stories of how much gold and wealth are plenty in these lands, with towers, palaces and tombs of the dead elven kings, great architects and heroes, all filled with ridiculous amounts of gold. Mostly lies and filled with bitterness and hate, than truth, which would lead you astray from the most precious Zerrikanian treasure. Which, is knowledge. The Elves have managed to collect through the centuries enough knowledge to make the greatest library one could ever imagine, filled with manuscripts dating a few millennia back. When, on the other side of the Blue Mountains the elves were dominant and mankind had no grasp upon any piece of territory. Monsters roamed the grasslands, forests and hills outside the mighty elven cities and the first set of witchers haven't been created yet.

An important hub of this vast land, is the ancient elven city of Yolwelkairr. As some tribes still consider it to be 'The cradle of the rest of the world'. For here, the legendary dragon Zerrikanterment created the rest of the known world. Known among the few scholars in

Zerrikania, for the aforementioned library of Zyvra, named after an elven philosopher, architect, scholar and astronomer.

The other famous city was more of a political capital and as few of it's residents like to subtly point out as the 'true capital'. Situated up the north-western shore of the Naa'l, the vast river flowing through the elven city of Yolwelkairr and the city of Khu'Lu located many hundreds of miles north. A city that once belonged to the lands of Haakland a few centuries back. Conquered during the War for Glory between Haakland's Emperor Waas ov'Noul and Zerrikania's, elected leader of the united tribes and clans, Laleh of Thyr. The great city was taken as a spoil of war, after a siege that lasted two weeks. It's strong walls resisted more than a hundred strikes of the Zerrikanians. And when it's northern wall finally fell, it marked the ending of a blood soaked war, that lasted half a decade. The only war Zerrikania ever took part in. Reducing the armies of the Haaklanders from thousands to mere hundreds. The unity of the tribes and clans made during the war was dismantled once it was ended. And the tribes resumed the fight among themselves.

Therefore, the local remark, 'true capital', for it marks one of the most important achievements of Zerrikanian military superiority upon their northern neighbor, Haakland. Also because of fewer foreigners, such as dwarfs and other scholars from the lands on the other side of the Blue Mountains.

Walt von Svarnst's Journal - Times of Yore.

The Oasis of Gawa had been the most important camp site for Zerrikanian people since the first humans walked past the Blue Mountains and settled here.

Old stories tell of a large colony that came from the east, of men and women carrying on their backs, thick furs of white bears long before The Great Migration. Who traversed the frozen Eastern Sea, during The Long Lasting Winter.

And after a long time had been accepted by the Elves at their Palace of Ice, on the banks of the great frozen Naa'l.

The Palace of Ice, was protected by the cold and blizzards by a magical dome that surrounded the Palace and the city around it.

It is said that they offered knowledge as a fee to enter and live in and around the Palace of the Elves.

He heard a voice.

It came from a place that looked familiar.

Close to the market, near an inclined tower, circled by weeds, that gave birth to a beautiful blue flower. Near it, a tavern's lights illuminated the musky cubic stone paved street, near the southern bank of the Yaruga...

'Savages and blood thirsty monarchs rule your world, monster slayer...', whispered the mysterious voice. 'You, belong with them ! Soaked in blood and riddled with scars that won't heal...'. The voice became louder. 'You search for a home that has long been reduced to cinder. The people you knew, are no more. Death, took them a long time ago. You, Vatt'ghern, are alone. Your purpose, predestined-'.

'No !', a loud grunt echoed on the street the has now fallen into a dark abyss, leaving place to an endless darkness.

'...You cannot fight it. You cannot run from it...'.

He then fell too, into the darkness.

'No one, escapes their fate.'

'Witcher ?', she asked with a gentle voice, then asked again with a more familiar tone. 'Gerd ?'.

He inhaled then exhaled and followed with an answer. 'What is it ?'.

'There's this woman that asked about you...', she replied then tried to remember her name. 'Hmm...Keira Metz !'.

'Where is she ?', he asked lifting himself up, on the edge of the rugged bed.

'On the hallway...', the girl responded.

'Let her in...', he said, grabbing his trousers from the nightstand next to the bed.

'Alright.', replied the girl.

'And Helena, tell the madam we need to talk.'

'Sure.', she responded, walking out of the room to tell the mage she could enter.

'Morning...', said the mage with a slight tone of disgust. 'Tell me this. Why in the name of all things did you choose to spend the night here ? When, our 'common friend' offered you a room fit for kings and queens ?'. she continued with the same unchanged tone. While Gerd checked the bottles that were scattered on the floor near the bed, to see if one may yet still hold a drop of booze.

The room Gerd slept in was within a brothel, situated near the port. Offered as a reward by Zedt Verner himself, for the job the witcher had done for him.

'No particular reason at all. Shit...', he said, disappointed.

'Mhm. Changing subject. What happened ? Did you find your poison vendor ?'.

'I did.'

'And ?',

'I found the buyer.', he said, then looked at Keira who was still unsatisfied with his answers so far. 'And...I'll make him a visit.'

'Good enough.', she replied crossing her arms.

'That's why you came all the way here ? To learn of something this little.'

'I firstly checked your room, then chose to come to this place.'

'How did you knew I was here ?', he asked, grabbing his jacket.

'You have your secrets, I, have mine...', she said as Gerd picked up his swords and crossbow.

He showed a slight smile, as he sat at a table near the window, pouring himself in a goblet some water.

They didn't say much after that. Keira kept still, looking around, while Gerd grabbed a few bites from the food Helena brought to his room previously.

'Witcher...', she said, taken by a shiver at the end.

'Hmh ?', he said while chewing.

'What do you know about illusions ?'.

'What ?', he said swallowing, then he noticed the increased trembling of his medallion followed by the squeak of the floors near him.

He moved his left hand downward towards the floor in the blink of an eye.

'Get out !', he yelled, while casting a powerful version of the sign of Aard.

Keira escaped through a portal she casted beneath her, right before Gerd made the sign.

The sign blew out the door from it's hinges and shattered the windows in the room. But through all that, it revealed three men within the room, that had been pushed away, some stopped near the walls, others fell, by the magical sign of the witcher. Who after breathing in some air, unsheathed his steel sword and leapt towards one of the three men who managed to rise from the floor.

The intensity of the sign had been so great, that it damaged the man's ear drums, so much his ears bled. The witcher, cut him diagonally from his left leg towards his right shoulder then stabbed him in the chest, while the other two regained their composure. Both approached the witcher slowly, then the one standing to his left, a bit skinnier then the other, attacked first with a high blow, which Gerd avoided by making a step to the right, casting Aard in the direction of the first attacker, pushing him behind a few good steps. While from the right, he deflected a similar attack, and slashed the man above the right hip, turning the momentum given by the swing to a pirouette and slashed the carotid artery of the other, then turned and

made the hand sign for the Aard spell once again, pushing the more corpulent one against the wall and with a lunge he stabbed him in the heart.

Keira's portal took her back to her temporary residence, in the western side of Novigrad. With her traveled west the chopped left leg of a man, that when she opened the portal he didn't manage to react and had his leg severed when it closed.

While the rest of the body was in the hallway now. His neck broken, standing up right against the wooden wall. He wasn't able to regain his balance with only one foot and had been surprised by the witcher's defensive measure, being thrown away like a ragdoll by the wind spell.

'Have you heard of the old elven tale about The Long Lasting Winter ?', he asked his apprentices. Few nodded their heads others looked at the ones next to them, while others casted their attention towards the old man, sitting near the fire. 'Well, it is said that it took place long before the age of humans...'

Scent of Blood

.XX. Scent of Blood.

The dark-red substance dripping on the wooden floors of the hallway in which several people gathered to see what the earlier racket was all about, began to collect into a small puddle around the corpse of the mage.

A woman's quick and stumpy steps made themselves heard from the left side of the corridor where the stairs were, and not a moment later she squeezed herself through those curious few that arrived before she did. Among them was Helena, her best girl and help.

'What the fuck' happened?', she asked Helena, who didn't know either, nor did she know how to answer that question. Though, they both knew it was the room the witcher spent the night in. 'I leave for a mere half an hour and when I come back I find in my brothel a dead man, bleeding on my floors?'

'I, don't know what happened, madam.'

'Well, lucky for us there is someone that does. Is he in there?'. Helena nodded softly while looking down at her shoes. The madam was angry, as her eyes narrowed, and she kept clenching her right hand into a fist, like she wanted to punch someone. But, luckily for all the people that gathered in the hallway, the witcher just stepped out of the room. 'You!', she yelled, as she bolted towards him. 'What is the meaning of this!?', she said while turning her head, looking inside the room. 'Oh! It's not just one, but, four dead men in my brothel...'. She took a deep breath, then lifted her head looking the witcher straight in the eyes. 'What the fuck happened here?!', she asked, entering the room. Which was trashed, bits of glass near the windows, the walls barely recognizable from all the blood that was spilled on them, a hole in one, where beneath it laid the corpse of a man, and worst of all, was that smell, which she thought would never leave the room, no matter how much one would clean, scrub and wash.

'They had a contract on me...', said Gerd, standing behind the madam.

She exhaled then scoffed. 'I...', she whispered, turning. 'I'll fucking kill you!', trying to punch Gerd in the jaw, who caught her arm right before she would make contact. Out of fear she would hurt her hand, or worse, break it. 'Let go of my arm!', she said, while unnoticed by Gerd, she struck him with her left foot right in between the jewels.

'Oh!', whispered Helena, making a wry face, standing beyond the door jamb.

The witcher's face didn't change but he did move a bit to his right, placing one hand on the wall, swallowing, while the madam, went after, and stopped in front of him, smiling.

'How are they to blame...', Gerd said.

'They're not. I just wanted to hurt you a bit...!'

'Mhm...!'

'I'll make it up to you, later.', she said, placing her right hand on his crotch. 'For now, you and I have some unfinished business...', she continued, kissing his chin.

'We do ?'.

'Yes, we do. Now, stop whining and clean this up. Then, when your finished come downstairs.'.

She was a piece of work, Gerd thought. Beautiful, even though she was almost in her forties. A courtesan turned into a successful business-woman, who turned an old abandoned residence into one that could easily be said is amongst the most successful brothels in Novigrad. A transformation made with a bit of help from one of Novigrad's underworld bosses, Zedt Verner, who used her and other courtesans as spies, for many years.

Gerd, met her some time ago, when she was still in her twenties, and worked at the Passiflora, while doing a contract on a Higher Vampire, that liked to fornicate and then drain the victims of their blood. A contract that did not end well for Gerd, but he managed to make a deal with the vampire. Badly injured, he had stayed in Novigrad for a while, and Ingrid, looked after him, while developing a short relationship with her during his lengthy stay in the city.

Finally, when Gerd regained his full mobility, and after some chatter that could be noticed coming from below, two men belonging to the city's guard came up the stairs and one walked inside the room.

'Mornin'. I am Klaus von Rothnheim, captain of the city watch, There is my officer, Yuri Wollach.', said the guard with a grunt, as he passed the door jamb, and entered the room.

'Gerd, witcher.'.

'Short and to the subject.', replied the captain, followed by a cough. 'All right then. What happened here ?'.

'A failed assassination attempt.', replied Gerd, pulling out a piece of paper that he found on one of the assassins within the room. The captain took the sheet of paper and glanced over it.

'Do you know who might want your head, master witcher ?', asked the guard giving the paper back to Gerd.

'Not at this moment, no.'.

'Are you by any chance...Withholding information vital to this case ? 'Cause if you do-'.

The officer, who until now stared at the corpse of the mage, entered the room his captain and the witcher were in. 'By the Holy Flames...', he whispered, pushing his helmet upwards with his index finger.

'I do not. I guess you'll handle the bodies from here on out ?'.

'Yes.'.

'You'll take them to the morgue, right ?'.

'Yes.', responded the captain, once again.

'Is there anything else you'd want to know ?', asked the witcher.

'That's all. If there will be further questions, someone will be sent to pick you up.'.

'Farewell, then.', replied Gerd, getting out of the room, walking towards the stairs.

The buyer, was as described by Francess, to be a man, around his fifties, dark haired, sturdy, handsome, with a scarred left ear, and who had his right hand's middle finger missing. According to the information Francess acquired from the man himself, as he mentioned a village, south-east of Novigrad, called Erde. And was accompanied by a scholar, Vasyl Schaltz, who chose to remain outside.

So, he planned to hear what the scholar had to say about the man, after which he'd ride to Erde, and see if he could find anything of use there.

'Hey !', yelled Ingrid, the madam, as soon as she saw him come down the stairs, placing herself between Gerd and the door. 'You are lucky the guards showed up. Hurried aren't you ? Where to ?'.

'Must you know ?', he asked, as Ingrid replied with a squint. 'The residence of a scholar, Vasyl Schaltz...'.

'Ah...', she puffed. 'I know that egotistic prick. He used to come here a while ago, and once asked for me to pose nude for one of his paintings...'.

'Huh, did you do it ?'.

'I wanted to, but he wanted me to do it gratis. Hah ! He said the honor to be in the painting should be a reasonable price. I told him to shove that honorable painting up his arse, and show me some gold. I won't uncover all of this for honor. But, for the lack of it, and if I do, you better pay me some good coin.', she said laughing, then resumed. 'Do you know where he lives ?'.

'I do.'.

'Well, then do consider coming back here after you finish. Alright ?'.

'Sure.'.

'See you soon, then.', Ingrid replied, moving aside.

'See you.'.

Vasyl Schaltz's residence was in Novigrad's northern district, in Gildorf, west of St. Gregory's Bridge. He was a well known and respected individual among Novigrad's social elite, for his research, scientific papers and for his renown little hobby, nude paintings. Which, he would gift or sell to noblemen, at their grand feasts and parties. The latest, entitled 'Principessa', sold at Borsodi's auction, for one thousand and sixty crowns.

The house itself was enough proof of his wealth, and greed...

As any men or women of his social renown, there was little chance Gerd would get to knock on his door without the Temple Guard getting in the way.

And as expected...

Halt !', said a man, belonging to the Temple Guard, extending his arm, as Gerd approached the door of the scholar's house. 'State your business !'.

'I want to talk with the owner.'

'That can't possibly happen-'.

The door of Vasyl Shaltz's home opened before the guard could even finish his sentence, and a woman leaved the house. 'Have a nice day, my dear.', said the host, following closely behind her.

'Ah. The witcher about whom rumors say has an important contract in the city. Please, do come in.', he said. 'Vasyl Schaltz. Scholar, painter, and philosopher.'

'Gerd. Witcher.'

Then he entered the home of the scholar. Who's hallway and rooms were crowded with immense book shelves, maps and paintings from the entrance all the way to the chamber he took the witcher in. His home was filled with his work, most of it finished and some not. From murals to landscapes to portraits and then finally to those that presented nudity in such a natural way you couldn't peel your eyes off them. Showing wonderfully, the well crafted work of the painter, from who's eyes seemed to escaped no small detail. Adding life to the painting with each slight touch of his brush.

While the painter, dressed in his typical black Nilfgaardian, day to day clothes, that combined perfectly with his dark hair, and put in evidence his bright blue eyes seemed to deviate a bit from the image the witcher had in mind. But, as most of the people with a high status, he had theatricality as another lesser known hobby.

Kissing one cheek while slapping the other, Gerd thought, as he was about to sit down.

'If I may, what is the reason for this visit of yours to my humble home ?', asked the scholar, sitting down, near an unfinished canvas.

'Have you by any chance helped a man to find the shop of a herbalist recently ?'.

'Odd inquiry. But, I did. Why ?'.

'Did you manage to catch the name of that man ?'.

'He didn't speak much. But, I think his name was Reginald, sadly I don't believe he did mention anything about his surname. Though, I did hear him say that he was from a small village east of here, Erde...And that's pretty much what he told me on our way to the herbalist.'

'Nothing else ?'.

'Not a thing. I spoke the most, if I remember it correctly.'

'About ?'.

'The greatness of this magnificent city, of course. It's Architecture, and it's northern influences, mostly...Then, for some reason the discussion took a turn towards the most unhospitable areas of Novigrad that induce social anxiety to the people that reside there and how it affects their day to day activities. After which I slipped again, towards...'. He kept mumbling word after word, making Gerd to lose interest in whatever the scholar was so passionately talking about, tuning him out, as he began to admire a painting presenting the image of a naked, red-headed, blue-eyed woman, whose red locks of hair resembled a fierce roaring fire, while the look her blue eyes gave seemed to defy the thunder itself. Her gorgeous breasts, and delicious thin waist seemed to invite one's wondering eyes to explore every single line and beauty spots of her lower areas. At the same time revealing to the admirer a fact or conclusion, that the scene presented within the painting was contradicting itself, leaving once again the mind of the viewer to imagine himself\herself spending a mere night with such a woman and how would it turn out.

Thus, after analyzing every line of the painting, he resumed his attention towards the scholar.

A waste of time. Erde it is then...

So, he thanked the scholar for letting him enter his home and ask his questions, then stepped out of his residence. Heading towards the stables near the Tretogor Gate, from where he'd ride all the way to Erde. Where he hoped to find the buyer or at least something of use, preferably, the man's whereabouts...

The Bear: .III. Murmurs of the Sea

.XXI. The Bear: .III. Murmurs of the Sea.

'A leaf...

Our, most precious life,

It's length and golden years,

Unbeknownst to us...

The Countless Questions

Thus,

Bother the mind,

As deep as the deepest ocean, and as infinite as the sky.'

- Konstantin Wolwyen, 'Sophia...', Volume .II. Thirteen Century Poetry.

'Would you believe my luck, friend ? They said it rained so much the bridge over Yelena had been washed away into the Great Sea ! Damned weather...', said the blond bearded merchant sitting at the table near the wall, next to a window, only a few steps from the door.

'It's still pouring...', added a foreigner, as he had a northern accent, from Aedirn.

'The gods be damned ! It's been like this for days ! This, and that damned plague up north, that fucked me good this autumn...', cursed the merchant, looking out the window, running his hand over his head.

'Any word on the plague ?', asked the strange man sitting across the table. His head was covered by a rugged hood, but it did show a pair of menacing eyes, sheltered by a pair of thick eyebrows. Followed by his thin lips, pointy chin, and a long narrow, off-centered nose.

The merchant sighed, fixing his eyes on the man, then replied. 'Not much. They say it first took hold in Vizima, where it even robbed of life the princess herself, sweet Sophia, as well as countless others. Mages try to contain it but, rumors have it that the damned plague has spread all the way to Cintra. Then, there are those bloody beasts that feed on the dead and the living. The main road to Vizima is said to be full of them.', the blond bearded man paused as he took a drink, then resumed as he looked at his companion. 'Huh, your kind can't but profit from this shit, I bet my whole cart that's where your heading.', the man scoffed. 'You cat eyed son's of whores, always profit in such times, be it war or peace. All nonhumans should be burnt on pyres, not us ! 'Cause it matters not who's sick or healthy anymore, those damned

priests burn whomever they fancy. Maybe your kind started this along with mages and elves...to wipe us out-'.

'Trust me. None of my kind nor elf or mage, need a plague to rid this land of humans.', interrupted the individual sitting across the table. 'I suggest you to shut up, while you can...'.

'What ?', replied the merchant, showing a grin of his teeth. 'You're going to try something ? Here ?', he scoffed, as he was sure that the witcher won't dare harm him within a such crowded tavern.

'Try me.', the man answered, with his eyes fixated on the merchant.

In the time it would take one to blink, the stranger's knife impaled under the table, the tip coming out on the top side, covered in blood.

A table under which the merchant had stashed a crossbow, of small size, but enough to cause damage if fired. Placed at the exact position so it would hit the abdomen.

'Enough with the games, and the shit-talk. I know so far that you like to 'dress up' and pretend. You really thought you had me fooled ?', said the assailant, grabbing the man's neck. 'Tell me, where's the big bag of gold we were promised ?'

'I don't have...it-'.

'Then, who does ? Who ?!'.

As a result of all the ruckus that happened at the table. A tall man with a scarred left side of the face that watched them for a while, approached quickly, unsheathing his sword. 'Oy ! Freak !'.

'Friend ?', said the foreigner looking at the merchant, who didn't respond. And, before the scarred man even took his sword out of the scabbard. The aedirnian got up and with a slash of his knife, he managed two cuts, one above the knee and the other above the man's left wrist. The femoral and radial arteries, more precisely.

The man fell on his right knee, bleeding.

'Your pal, isn't he ?', the aedirnian asked the merchant who was breathing heavily. 'Don't try it, that knife I put through your hand, it's made of silver. As for your friend right here...He may live only if you answer what I asked. I don't like killing your kind, but, you pushed me and I don't like being pushed. Now...Fuckin' answer that damned question ! Where is the gold ?'.

The face of the merchant began to lose its form. It was melting, like a brick of iron under the heat of the forge. Changing its color to a pale yellowish nuance, while his eyes lost their color completely, becoming grey, almost entirely white.

'We...don't have it...We've spent it.', the non-human replied. As the folk inside, almost trampled over each other while getting out of the inn.

'You did ?', asked the foreigner with an unsettling calm. 'How convenient...'. He took a deep breath, and without hesitation he slashed the tall man's neck, then looked back at what was left of the figure that barely resembled the merchant just few moments ago. 'You are a terrible liar...'. Then, sat down on the other side of the table, while the sound of gurgling and moans of the dying man continued. 'Who has it ?'.

The remaining goo of the man standing across the table, made a sound as if he swallowed.

'You really want to die here ? Looking like this ?', the aedirnian moved his right hand in front of the creature, making a sign with his fingers. 'I'll burn you, slowly, until you turn to cinder. You are at my mercy now. Which is almost at its end. So, last chance. Who has my gold ?'.

As the leaking shape of what used to be a man, didn't respond, from the hand of the sorcerer a few sparks ignited, flowing towards the creature, fading away before touching it's melting face.

'Tell me.', said the foreigner, while with his right hand he casted a different spell.

'A- woman... She's in Forgeham. She's scarlet haired...'.

'The name...'.

'...Vera.'

His eyes watched him carefully, hoping to find clues of how his friend would react. He found none. His face did not change one bit since he entered the room.

'That's what I told him. I'm sorry, Gerd. I-.'

Gerd walked away, towards the left side of the room, and stopped near a small window looking out towards the sea, who's bright blue almost seemed united with the sky. 'This man was he-'

'A witcher. Don't know from where, exactly, besides his aedirnian accent.'

'Do you know his name ?'. he asked, watching the sea.

The end of Lammas, 1173 CE.

It was the end of summer.

That morning, the first leaves of the old oak in the courtyard of the witcher keep, had decided to start their journey towards their final rest, hibernation, in an endless cycle they repeat and endure since no man, elf nor dwarf even began to breathe. The beginning of their pilgrimage, already wearing their green coats with yellowish marks as they were picked up by the northern wind combined with a sea breeze flowing from the south, which caressed the walls of the keep and began to whistle as it passed through the crack of the main gate. While a few crows resting on the edge of the fortress's western wall seemed to have a heated discussion,

and beyond it, the forest that stretched all the way to the harbor, not far from the keep, was covered by a dense fog.

Sitting on a stump, the old witcher, Mousar, admired the change that nature had set in motion for a few days now. As he cleaned his silver blade, having planned to take a contract or two. For he heard of a beast roaming the forests south of the small village of Fayrlund and of some witcher work needed in Arinbjorn.

'The warmth of summer will soon leave those lands...!', he whispered. 'Time of the frost is near...!'

During that time, the keep was inhabited by the old witcher and Neena. Who was out that morning, as she went into the village, near the harbor, to visit a friend and with some luck buy a few fresh caught fishes from the fisherman and a few eggs from his wife.

A few seven or eight springs ago, right before Gerd and Ksander would usually prepare to leave the keep. She had them convinced to help her prepare a patch of land inside the inner courtyard, where she thought to grow spices and other plants, as it would help lower the amount of spent coin during the autumn and winter.

Mousar, remembered the time there was a garden in which they used to grow the ingredients used for witcher potions and those which were used during the Trail of the Grasses. After all, it was the old witcher who mentioned the patch of land near the entrance to the inner courtyard would be the right place for Neena's garden.

Last winter, she mentioned her plans to buy a few hens so she won't have to buy eggs anymore. Mousar agreed, the other witchers beside Junod didn't weigh in on the discussion. Ayo, who had been injured during a contract and was recovering at the keep, joked, saying 'That's all a witcher needs, chickens...!'

However, besides the sooner arrival of the colder autumn, it had also brought more trouble in the Skellige Isles and through the main land. As a plague spread rapidly across the continent. The fear of it reaching the Isles was increased by the recent rumors of it reaching the lands of Cintra, and spread north as far as the northern shore of the Pontar. On the main land, in some cases pits had been dug outside the towns, cities or villages, where bodies of those that had died of the plague, were burned, sometimes both the dead and the living, while the number of necrophages increased around those areas. Whole villages had been burnt to ashes, the dead laying near the main roads, while those that still lived, hid in the forests and within caves, from both men and beasts.

The elves killed anything that came near their territories, while at the same time the gates of the human fortresses and towns were closed shut. Ports as well, merchant routes left bare, while the kingdoms and their kings in hand with the politicians, aided by the City Guard, and the Eternal Fire priests kept the other capitals clean. Vizima being the most affected of all.

Therefore, the Skellige Isles were closed to any ship that sailed from the main land or any other place for more than a year. The Isles fared well, as what is Skellige if not independent of any ties with the continentals...

'...Gael, as I recall. I don't know his guild.'. He stopped, sucking his lips. 'I'm not very helpful, am I ?'.

Gerd sighed. 'You helped enough...'.

'I'm sorry.'.

'Sorry doesn't cut it.', replied Gerd, looking out the window.

That had been a sign, he guessed. 'I guess you'll hunt him down ?'.

Gerd didn't answer right away. He knew he wanted to, but, after so many days, it was quite hard to find a lead. 'His trail is cold. The chances that I manage to even find him are very slim.'.

'You are a great tracker, you'll surely find something.'.

After taking a deep breath, Gerd turned towards the man. 'What's your part in this ?'.

'What do you mean ?'.

'What did you and Vera need all that coin for ? Was it debt ?'.

'Nothing gets by you, does it ? Yes, debt. That job we did, had...Unexpected complications...'.

'Meaning ?'.

'We needed an extra set of hands...'.

'The witcher and his pal.'.

'Right.'

'Which you screwed over, because ?'.

'The reward didn't cut that well in five...'.

'Meaning it wasn't enough to pay the debt.'.

'Yes...'.

Gerd returned to the table the auburn haired cintrian soldier sat at.

'And the debt, is still unpaid...'.

'Correct.', the cintrian replied with a sigh.

'Yet, you seem to handle this nicely.'.

'You jest, right ? I have, had, a profitable business in Neunreuth. I had a decent way of life, and I undoubtedly don't find any damned benefits from a life on the run.'.

'You can become whoever you want-'.

'True. But, to have something I build myself is hard to come by. It takes time, Gerd. It took me years to settle in Neunreuth...'.

'Therefore you need my help...'.

'I do. If you offer it.'.

'How could I refuse.'.

The soldier breathe with relief. 'Thanks Gerd, I'll be forever in your debt.'.

'I think you have enough debts as it is, old friend. Let's not add even more.'.

'Right.', replied the cintrian soldier, happy that he had a trusted help. Finally...

The Bear: .IV. Fire and Blood

.XXII. The Bear: .IV. Fire and Blood.

The dimming golden rays of the sun were strong enough to shed light on his thoughts. While it's fading warmth caressed his entire body...

The croaking of the seagulls and the waves of the sea crashing into the rocky shore, were not only a fitting song, but felt awfully right for a way to say goodbye. He hardly found any words, even though he sat there for some good chunk of time, and just stared at the horizon, where the sky and sea unite.

He knew words were worthless when there was not a soul to hear them.

He couldn't think of anything else but the remaining taste of metal in his mouth and the scent of smoke. As his tired eyes, saw only flames...

On the muddy road, filled with puddles and muck that you could sink in, a wagon was making it's way to the closest town, Lothorn. Located beneath The Amell mountains, on Marnadal's Stairs, at the top of a great hill.

The two auburn horses were snorting while they pulled the wooden, roofed wagon uphill.

'It's here alright. The damned cold and cursed rain...', spoke the carriage driver.

'Quit whining...', said the man sitting down, in the back side of the carriage. 'It's not that bad.'

The driver clicked his tongue. 'I don't know. But, we better find a fitting place to stop. The road just got from bad to worse. And with all this rain water flowing downhill...'. He lifted himself up to look ahead. 'Then, there are the horses. They need to rest. They are both exhausted, this road conditions are brutal to them. We must stop. What do you say ? We'll continue in the morning, if, it doesn't rain till then...', the driver said as he sat back down, then turned his head. 'Gerd ?'.

'Fine, but I don't think we can continue on this road tomorrow.'

'If so, what then ?'.

'We leave the wagon, and take the horses...'

'If it doesn't rain, right ?'.

'I doubt it won't...'

The driver sighed. 'Something had to go bad, huh ?'.

'Take us off the road, Yve. We'll let the horses rest, and hope that the rain stops so that we can advance tomorrow...!'

'This looks like a good place to camp.', added Yve, steering the wagon off the road in a clearing among the woods.

'I'll take care of the horses.', said Gerd, getting out of the wagon, as soon as it stopped.

'Good.', the halfling replied, going in the backside of the wagon.

While, Gerd took the horses from the front to the left side of the carriage, under an extendable canvas roof. Where he placed some hay and water.

'We're lucky you went hunting yesterday...', said the halfling from within the wagon. 'And we still have some vodka left.'

'I doubt I would've found anything edible or not rotten, in this weather.'

'We are doing good.'

'I guess...', replied Gerd from outside.

'I mean we're good, not perfect. But good. Decent. Alive...', said the halfling, unrolling a sheet of canvas on a small table, just as Gerd joined him inside the wagon. Placing on it, bread, salted meat, tomatoes, bacon, a slice of cheese, and remains of the rabbits Gerd had caught the day before.

Gerd snorted.

'What ? We have a lead. A good one. Trust me, Gerd. This man will have the information we need to find that sack-of-shit, named Gael...!'

'If this man's still breathing, you mean. You heard what that group of peasants said back at the inn. Regarding, their plans to storm the fort and kill the baron and the other pricks living within ?'.

Yve scoffed. 'You believed that horseshit ?'.

'I've seen such horseshit, before. And it happened to a witcher keep.'

'You jest, right ?', asked Yve, starting to show a slight bit of concern.

'I do not. They got themselves all killed, alright...But, they managed to get in. And if I am to believe that horseshit, that fort's walls didn't sound as strong as they once have been.'

'Shit. I swear we had a rather fucked up side of this damned thing that is called luck ! Didn't we ?'.

'We sure did.', replied Gerd. 'Just stick to the plan.'

Yve nodded, biting from a slice of bread. 'How are you ? Didn't talk much since the Inn. What's bothering you ?'.

'Uh, nothing.'

'Huh...'

'What ?'.

'I, remember Vera saying that you don't like when I ask such questions. Sorry, I have a curious nature.'

'Your kind usually does...'

Yve clicked his tongue, opening the bottle of vodka. 'I shouldn't have brought her up, I apologize.'

'It's fine.'

Yve drank from the bottle, then, passed it to Gerd.

'She talked a few times of you. I for one haven't seen you in a while, and as I've been traveling with her for more than a year...I'd wager she didn't either, isn't it ?'.

Gerd took a sip, then placed the bottle on the table. 'Vera and I haven't seen each other since the last time she came to Skellige. So, almost two years.'

'I knew you two weren't a piece, but, you did have something going on, for a while at least. I did notice.'

'I don't think we did...'

'Surely, you don't mean that.', replied Yve, taking a chug from the bottle.

'I'm pretty sure I do. I wasn't surprised when I heard she died. I expected that her way of going about the place would lead to this, at some point...'

Yve sighed. 'Well, she never was fond of the idea to settle down somewhere...'

'Huh...', mumbled Gerd.

'Gael will pay for it. For everything he did. For wrecking my house, my shop and my wagon. Everything...', said Yve, biting from a piece of bacon.

'I don't know...', added Gerd.

'What do you not know ? He killed Vera. He burned her alive, Gerd. He-'

'No. All your little scheming and plans got her killed. It is the result of all your actions this far. And this time neither of you got out unscathed. You two never knew when enough was

enough. I am here to help you get back whatever you have left in Neunreuth. I am not here for vengeance. And I won't kill Gael unless I must.', interrupted Gerd.

Yve, didn't respond nor was able to look in the eyes of the witcher. He feared what he would see in them if he did. He barely swallowed the bacon he chewed on as he stared at the table. He knew this would be the last time, he and Gerd would ever get to have any kind of conversation. For once he's able to resume his business in Neunreuth, he won't get to see the witcher again. Gerd's previous words had been kind, truthful and harsh at the same time as he showed as always, clarity. And above all, Gerd was right, this were the consequences, he and Vera had to face at some point...

The winter's early and sudden appearance had brought colder weather and a nasty fog that covered the lands till noon.

Outside the wooden gates of a decent town named Forgeham, in the southern lands of Metinna, a horse at gallop passed like an arrow the wagon of a merchant. Almost making the driver steer off the road, into the bushes. The rider of the mount, was barely standing in the saddle. His left hand pressed against his lower right side of the abdomen, while blood flew down his leg, on the stirrup, or on the saddle then down the horse's belly. His face swollen and bruised and his nose broken.

'Stop !', yelled a man guarding the gate. 'Who did that to you ?'.

'I'm to-deliver a message-', said the man, coughing, then spat blood. 'A woman-Vera-', continued the rider, leaning towards the man, then fell from the saddle. 'Take-it. Here-', said the man, pulling a scroll from his satchel.

'I'll get you help-'. said the guard as he took the scroll.

'No ! It- to late for that. Give- her the message. Quickly. Also- send someone to the Commander, tell him to ask about the- Succubus-'.

'But-'.

'Do as I said, boy ! Go on- Fuckin' go !'.

'Alright sir.', replied the guard, while the man dragged himself near a post on which he leaned, coughing. He stood there for a while, looking out towards the fields and the forest beyond them. Mumbling and moaning, as he was looking at his bleeding wound. 'Oh, fuck...', murmured the man. 'Here girl. Come here...', he continued, whistling to his mare. He struggled to reach for it at first, but after many tries he succeeded. As from the saddle he pulled a crossbow, and two arrows.

On the main road, another rider was approaching at gallop. With two swords on his back, and as he came closer to the gates he unsheathed one. While the message carrier, aimed and fired an arrow, towards the other rider. Who, slid left from the saddle and behind his horse, reappearing from the right side, while the shooter reloaded his crossbow. From where the witcher threw a rock, knocking the crossbow out of the man's hand.

Then, the witcher approached the dying man. 'I would have aimed for the horse's front legs...', then with a smug look on his face, continued. 'You were almost there. Huh, well done getting this far. I just kept hoping to see your corpse in a ditch on the side of the road.', he said, walking past the messenger. 'But, let's both agree that you completed your mission.'

In front of a hut at the edge of town, the guard who was instructed to deliver the message, reached the door which was wide open, so he entered, with his right hand on the sword's handle.

'Who're you ? And what do you want ?', asked Vera, sneaking behind the man, poking a knife in his back.

'A-message. Here-', said the guard, handing her the scroll.

She took the scroll, shoving the man inside and closed the door. Her face frowned, while she read the message. 'Fuck. The man that gave you this, is he dead ?'.

'Uh...I do not know. But, he was injured-', replied the young guard.

'What about the man that gave him these injuries ?'.

'I've seen no one else but him. He must've fled, or escape that man.'

'I doubt it.', she replied, taking her sword.

'If so...I want to help. I can help you leave town.', added the guard, pushing his chest out, adopting a straight pose, resting his hand on the sword's pommel.

'You do ?', she asked looking the young man in the eyes, moving a few locks of scarlet hair behind her right ear. While her lips curved in a hypnotizing way, slowly and elegantly, leaving them parted at the end of the sentence, while her eyes remained fixed on his.

'I do.', he answered.

'Good.'

On the opposite side of town, near the western gate. Gael, made a slow, but steady progress towards his gold, before three guards with their swords in hand appeared and stopped him.

'Not one more step ! Mutant...', spoke the one in the middle. 'Turn 'round and walk out. Or, we'll throw your corpse out ! You choose...'

The witcher took a deep breath as he walked towards the guards.

'A corpse it is then. Get him boys !'.

Two more guards appeared from the right and left side of the main road running through the town, moving behind the witcher, who was now surrounded. Two of them attacked, one from behind and the other from the front. Gael avoided the blade of one that came from behind as he moved right, then blocked the other. Knocking the first to attack in the face with his elbow,

who made a few steps back, while hitting the side of the other's knee and breaking it. Then with a diagonal strike, he slashed the man's neck, swiftly stabbing the one behind after.

'Can you afford to lose more men ? Captain ? These two were quite ripe. Be the wiser one, and don't let the others have the same fate. I'm looking for a woman. Scarlet haired, named Vera. Must have come into town a couple of days ago. Know about her ?'.

The captain said nothing. Nor did he move, or look as if he wanted to.

'There will be no more blood spilled. I just want to know where she stays.', added Gael.

'Fine.', responded the captain, compressing his lips. 'Sheath your swords, men.', he continued looking at his subordinates. 'She's in a hut on the other side of town. I'll show you.'

'Lead the way, captain.', replied the witcher, sheathing his steel sword.

They led the witcher to the hut, but as he already began to suspect on his way there. Strengthened by the sight of the hut, which was empty and the door wide open.

'I'm a fool.', Gael whispered. 'I'm a fool.', he said once again and this time he raised his voice. 'I should've known better.', he continued, unsheathing his sword. From behind the huts near the road, from all sides, at least a dozen men belonging to the town's guard surrounded him.

From within the hut, a man walked out. Dressed in a green and white breast plate, with the symbol of a crescent moon on his shoulders. He was the Commander of the town's guards.

'Drop your sword. and you'll die by the gallows. If you do not comply, you'll die here and now, painfully. You killed two of my men. Good men. Young...', said the commander, taking a few steps towards the witcher, then stopped, clutching his fingers around his sword's handle. 'And beyond that, you are responsible for the death of a good friend of mine.'

'Is this what you want ? Death ? Then so be it. I will offer you and your men, death.', Gael said, with a grunt as he popped opened a flask, and drank it all. He placed both of his hands on the sword, and took a wide stance.

'You won't get out of this town. Not alive at least. That I swear to the gods.', replied the commander, unsheathing his sword. 'Get rid of him !'.

...

'Where are you going ?', asked the guard.

'Curious ?', Vera responded, while saddling her horse. 'For one, as far as I can from here, then, I don't know...', she continued taking the reins of her horse, leading it out of the stables.

'The man that had your friend hurt, is he coming after you as well ?', asked the guard, following behind her.

'Yes, he is.'

'If he finds you...Will he hurt you as well ?'.

'What do you think ?', replied Vera climbing in the saddle.

The guard didn't answer. He just watched as she walked to the edge of the alley, almost reaching the main road. Then, he ran towards the end of the alley, looking down the main road, from where, accompanied by the rising wind, came a screech of swords followed by a deep groan and a thud.

The previous muddy, puddled road, has turned red now. With a dozen of corpses scattered on it, some still gurgling and choking on their own blood.

'The gods will see-that you are punished-', grunted the Commander, grabbing the witcher's sword, staring him in the eyes.

'Your gods are fake, old man.', replied Gael, pulling his sword out of the commander's chest.

While within the alley...

'Is that him ?', asked the guard, taking a few steps back towards the woman.

Vera gave the reins to the guard, getting off the saddle, and walked to the corner of the hut, to take a look.

'There is no other way out of this alley...', added the guard, grabbing the handle of his sword.

'Are you mad ? You'd rather die ?.'

'I can distract him-'.

'No.', she answered jumping back in the saddle.

'I can't leave you to be killed. I said I can get you out. I plan to keep my promise. Also, I have an idea.'

Gael advanced up the main road, with the belief that the woman had escaped not long before he arrived. While he took a few more steps, from an alley, he heard the neighing of a horse, and soon around ten of them ran out on the main road. Among them, he saw two riders, who turned left accelerating at gallop speed.

Atop the tallest hill of Marnadal's Stairs, sat the town of Lothorn. Home to merchants, pig and sheep farmers, dwarves practicing as blacksmiths and armorsmiths, elves, half-elves, poor and rich folk, in numbers of at least a hundred men, children and women. Built around the fortified castle of a renown family of noble origins, the Yrnwhold's. Once a household that wed their children into royal families, now, according to the local rumors and tales spread by folk, a forgotten bunch of dimwits and cutthroats, led by a self-named Baron of the Silvery Hill, famed a few generations ago for it's vast source of silver and gold ores. Nowadays, a barren heap of dirt, that was sucked dry of it's precious minerals, only frequented by drunken men for it's famed houses of pleasure, rumored to host the most

beautiful, talented and exotic whores, one could find north of the Yelena till' the southern shores of the Yaruga.

Which became recently, a rather tame battlefield between the locals and the remaining descendants of the Yrnwhold family.

Surrounded by a lush forest it was almost hidden from the rest of the world. Almost...

'We're in luck ! Gerd, my friend.', spoke Yve. 'Behold ! The twin towers of Lothorn's castle.'.

'Enjoy them while you can. We won't have time while in town.', replied Gerd, moving towards the front of the wagon.

Soon, the western entrance of the town appeared from beyond the trees. And so did the smoke and rubble of a couple of huts, that had been torched during the night.

'That is-'.

'Quiet.', said Gerd, listening.

Ahead, in the middle of the road, two elves appeared from within the woods.

'Gerd ?', asked Yve nervous, nudging the witcher.

'Stop that wagon, friend.', spoke one of them. Dark haired, tall and slim, holding a sabre, while the other next to him a bow.

'Gerd ?', Yve asked again, as he pulled on the reins.

'There are a couple more in the woods.', whispered Gerd, while the elf that stopped the wagon, approached.

'What brings you this way ?'.

'Trade.', responded Yve.

'Is that so ?', asked the elf, approaching them. 'What kind of trade ?'.

'Of all kinds. Mostly Alchemy, Herbalism, and trinkets peddling.'.

'What of the mutant ?', asked the elf, staring at Gerd.

'He's a friend.'.

'A friend, eh ?', the elf replied. 'Get out of the wagon, halfling. Don't try anything mutant, if you don't want him to sink an arrow through your skull.'. He looked at the two, mostly at Gerd, as he assumed, he could cause more damage then the halfling. 'Watch the cat-eyed one. See that he doesn't try anything. If he moves, he dies.'. He stopped on the left side near the horses, petting one's belly.

The archer nodded, then with a smile, he set his green eyes upon the monster slayer, ready to fire.

'Who are you actually working for ? Midget...!'

'No one. I'm here to trade my wares.'

'You seem to be in short supply if my eyes serve me right.', the elf said, while looking inside the wagon.

'It's been a luckless end of the year thus far. With the plague up north...', answered Yve, looking nervous.

Nervousness that the elf picked on, and didn't seem to let it pass. 'We saw you coming from the south. We have seen you since you reached these woods back south. We've been watching you since then. Last time. Who are you working for ?'.

'I tell you the truth. No one.'

The elf's eyes squinted, and looked within the woods for a moment, then he fixed his eyes on them once again. 'Bind them !'.

From the woods behind them, two elves stepped onto the road, holding their bows high ready to let go of the string, would one of them make a slight move.

'We're looking for Ser Almar of Sodden.', said Gerd.

'Really ? And what could the likes of you have to do with a famed knight such as he ?', asked the elf.

'Information.'

'Are you sure-', whispered Yve, before being interrupted by the long stare given by the elf.

'Eael ! You pointy-eared son of a wench ! Bugger off, and leave them be !', yelled an auburn bearded dwarf. Wearing a chain mail and holding a mace, as he appeared from behind a burnt hut, accompanied by a human and two other dwarves. 'Fuck off back into your damned woods before I'll break you like a twig ! I'll take em' from here on.'

'But-'

'No buts elf ! Fuck off !'.

'Fine, you half-witted brute...', replied the elf, before he turned and walked on the side of the road.

'What ?!', the dwarf replied yelling, tightening the hold on the mace he held.

'Nothing.', answered the elf, as his men walked off the road, and disappeared into the thick woods.

'Thought as much !', the dwarf said, looking at Eael, having a short laugh. 'I apologize for my friend's cold and improper welcome. After all, he's a damned elf. A prickly one at that !'.

'It's alright.', replied Yve.

'Now, allow me to give you a proper welcome.', allowing Yve and Gerd to get back in the wagon. As he did after, followed by his men, who hanged on the backside of the wagon. As Eael watched them enter the town.

'I heard a few rumors. How bad is it ?', asked Gerd.

The dwarf gave a slight laugh, then turned to the witcher. 'Not as bad as you think. But bad nonetheless. That prick hides in his damned castle. Behind his Iron Gates, believing he is safe. A fuckin' coward like his idiot father and his grandfather before him. But, none have been this hateful, greedy or felt so lordly and royally. If his coward of a father was a fool and as nasty as a goat, the son is better described as fuckin' mad and delusional. His stupid father listened to common sense and had at least one foot in the muck, but this lunatic wants to bring back the old fame his family name once had. By once I mean three hundred years ago...!.

'Who burned the huts ?', asked Yve, as they went past them.

'Those cowards that hide beyond their bloody walls. Damned duvvelsheyss...', responded the dwarf, pointing towards the towers of the castle, then spat. 'Soon enough, that self-entitled prick and his whore of a sister will have their heads mounted on a spike atop their fancy burning towers ! Anyhow, I am Darqen Daron.', the dwarf continued scratching his beard.

'Yve Malterbach and Gerd of Skellige.', replied Yve.

'I heard of you, witcher. You've been to Mahakam a few good years ago. Heard you've made many friends that day.', Draquen said, having a good laugh. 'Ah ! Don't worry, pal. Most lay dead by now.'.

Though very intrigued by Draquen's mention of Gerd's ventures in Mahakam, Yve had enough sense to not ask about it. 'Why did you come to our aid, Draquen ?'.

'Why ? Cause I fuckin hate that bastard to his guts and that band of cunts that follow him ! He suspected you work for that coward, Ermond. I told him to leave you be, obviously, he didn't listen. So, what do you want with the drunken knight ?'.

'Information.', answered Yve.

'He's been surely spewing heaps of information all over the whores at The Naughty Sirens by now. I doubt he knows something more than those girls already do. He's been there since he arrived in town, two full-moons ago. Fuckin' and drinkin' ever since.'.

The dwarf drove the wagon through the town, taking a right turn, on a street where they went past a few brothels and Inns, then left, going closer to the castle. Where, in front of an Inn and shop, he stopped. 'Here we are.', said the dwarf stepping off the wagon, followed by Yve.

'I guessed you needed rooms, so I brought you to my cousin's Inn. He'll take care of you. Rorin !', he yelled. 'From here, west where we took a left if you go further and then take a left, you'll find The Naughty Sirens.', then looked inside the shop and yelled again. 'Rorin !'.

'Stop screaming you fool !', responded another dwarf, as he walked out of the shop. 'What ?!'.

'I brought you clients.', replied Darquen.

'I'll go get our rooms.', said Yve, joining the dwarf, while Gerd would have to take the horses to a stable, and find a place to leave the wagon.

The guard and Vera rode away from Forgeham for almost half a day now.

Close to sunset, the guard, mentioned an abandoned hut, among the woods, not very far from the road. They both decided to stop and rest, confident that the witcher lost their tracks.

'I'll stand guard.', said the man stopping in front of the door, as Vera entered the hut.

'Don't be foolish. Get in. It's cold.', replied Vera.

'Fine.'

'What's your name ?', asked Vera, lighting a few candles.

'Bowen.'

'How did you know of this hut, Bowen ?'.

'A hunter used to live here. He died last summer. My father knew him.', he replied looking around. 'There's no wood. I'll go check the shed. I should feed the horses as well.'

'Alright.', Vera said, as she took off her sword and placed it on a table near the door.

He returned with plenty of wood, and made the fire, then left again to feed the horses.

When he finished everything he had to do, he placed a couple of pelts on the floor and sat near the fireplace, throwing from time to time some wood on it.

'Bowen...'

'Yes ?', he replied turning.

She appeared from behind a thin wall that separated the kitchen from the bedroom.

'Have you been with a woman before ?', she asked, covered by a blanket she let slide down her shoulders, revealing her breasts.

His mouth slightly opened, as his breath increased, and murmured. 'O-o-once...'

'Then you know what to do.', she said, approaching him. Allowing the blanket to fall on the floor. She took his left hand and placed it on her right breast, while she placed his other one on her left hip. Unbuttoning his pants, and gambeson. Kissing his neck, and chin, followed by his lower lip, that she took between hers. She slowly laid him on the pelts in front of the fire, sitting on top of him, kissing him while her other hand was playing with his growth, until he began to tremble. Then the moans began, and the shadows casted on the floors and walls of the hut displayed a dance, of lust and pleasure. Her back arched as she moved her hips in a elegant fashion. Making Bowen raise his back from the floor, planting his face between her breasts, sucking on her nipples, while his right hand moved downwards to her hip and lower, clenching his fingers around her flesh. And after all had reached the most intense point of their current activity, both shortly fell asleep. Cuddling, in front of the crackling fire.

The roar of the flames began to increase, waking Bowen, who woke Vera, as beyond the thin wall, the bedroom was in flames. They both raised from the floor and Bowen walked towards the door. When he opened it, his face was burned by a vicious stream of flames and he fell to the ground screaming.

The flames from the bedroom started to extend to the roof, when the witcher Gael, entered the hut. 'Felt good?', asked Gael, looking at Vera's naked body. 'You two should have never stopped. I thought you were smarter. I was wrong...'

Vera reached for her sword, when a crack was heard from above then a part of the roof collapsed on top of her. A beam fell on her mid section, trapping her beneath it.

Bowen's scream ended right after he fell on the floor. His face was a flesh barren skull now.

'You should've payed me.' He continued as he approached the place Vera took her sword from, where he found two pouches of gold placed on top of a wooden chest. He took them and left the hut that began to be engulfed in flames, while little flakes of snow began to fall, melting as they approached the fire...

His eye slowly closed shut, as he inhaled as much air his lungs could take, while his right hand clutched swiftly around the sword's handle.

'It's done...', he whispered through his teeth.

To be continued...

Crossroads

.XXIII. Crossroads.

The road to Erde was not one would call short nor safe, as bandits are known to pillage the merchant wagons passing through here, some coming from Kaedwen others not. Most, carrying illicit items and choosing this route with the intention of avoiding the payment of certain taxes or any requirements of permits for the transportation and handling of sensible merchandise. Therefore, it is not a loss for anyone in the city, as those that are valued, needed, and necessary, travel on the main road, whereas these were not needed, nor valuable. As most of their cargo is already stolen, or 'moved' from one Lord of the east to a thief's pathetic stash inside or out of the free city of Novigrad.

However, as it was close to dusk, and such a time of day should more than often induce several philosophical topics to ones mind, Gerd, was no exemption. This one, was a matter of certain importance to his contract, as the man's trail he followed, might prove to be a bit more complex. Empowered by a certain hunch that he had, that this man, Reginald. Wasn't working alone nor was he as mundane as he let the scholar believe. For, as he experienced during his long time on the path, a man's need for purpose is universal, but the understanding that such meaning is often given by other people is rather not easy to understand at first. Everyone needs orders, instructions, a reason and even a minuscule, almost insignificant thing to aim towards. The meaning of marriage besides the union created in front of the gods, brings purpose, and obligations of mutual understanding, and a deviation of your self-centered attention towards your other half. That is the concept of it, then there is the reality of it. The concept being the ideal, while the latter, the truth. Which is most of times hard to process and understand, most of time because life is too short and other times due the lack of patience or the naive ways people tend to think. Is that life is never as easy as it sounds, but always has a way to bring challenges and obstacles that are sometimes hard to overcome or avoid. And only a very few get to know and experience that everything, is due to a cause-effect relationship that most of times is unrelated to us until the moment it is.

Gerd recalled a contract he had in a village near Attre during his first year on the path. Where a fisherman fell victim to a drowner, who's only fault was that it had to prowl the areas inhabited by humans in order to feed itself. But none mentioned the fault belonged to the incompetent fool who ventured in these waters just to get more fish one unfortunate morning. Knowing that it was a place frequented by the drowner. He had a wife, and two children, obviously he did so he could catch more fish in order to sell and feed his family. Greed killed him at the same time the drowner did. Villagers avoided that area of the small bay for a reason. If he had waited two more days, Gerd would've arrived in the village, taking the contract and would've slayed the drowner, and the fisherman wouldn't have died. But, how could he tell that to the fisherman's grieving wife and orphaned children ? He had no right to, but assumed that they knew it.

Although witchers are described as being emotionless, merciless, unable to feel love or compassion. Gerd, did feel something, and it was disgust.

He didn't meant it, but that's what it was, disgust. Directed toward the incompetent husband this woman had chosen, who's greed costed him his life. And worst of all, the fact that the children had no say in all of this, no way of understanding how it happened, why and by whose fault. Which had everything to do with them. They were crying, sniffing and weeping, while the mother barely got to actually grieve herself or understand what happened, because she tried to comfort them.

Little did he knew back then, of how many more times he would encounter that feeling...

The thing about living this long, is that one gets to see plenty, but learn very few. Yet, if more time passes, one may get slowly but surely, the answers to questions that bother others to their graves. Small pieces of a puzzle, that not even one man or woman, nor elf or dwarf can ever complete. For its purpose is not to be completed but understood, deciphered.

But.

In truth...

Life itself to the naked eye, to an outside observer, uninterested, uninfluenced by myth or social constructs, looks and surely seems a mess. Which no one truly admits it, but rather try to lie themselves by making it merrier, with tools such as alcohol, sex, narcotics, poems and theatre pieces that awe the viewer, who like a troll gobbles every word, each lie.

And as a conclusion to these lines of thought. For the romantic, hopeful and poetic minds, life, is like a painting, that each men and women paints themselves, with the colors they choose. Yet, the saddest part, is that all of it is a farfetched self-inflicted illusion, and that most choose to see the rest of the world in a primitive construct composed out of only two components. Black and white. Bad or good...Helpless to admit that in truth there is nothing but a combination of the two. As the night has a way of transcending into day, and vice-versa, so does everything else. For nothing is truly good or raw evil. As in this situation comes perspective, a gift offered by wisdom, honed through the years..

Then there's the belief in destiny...

Which, couldn't be more bold but to expect one to nod at the idea that Destiny, willed a child to survive war, famine, sickness, death and then the pain of broken bones, bruises and nasty infections due to untended cuts before undertaking The Trail of Grasses. Which was followed by the worst kind of headaches, soreness, and then death again ? Only to be pushed closer towards death after ? So, in the end to become a witcher... A killer for hire, a monster slayer, that peasants and nobles alike, resent more then each other ? To march merry as a drunken dimwit, on The Path ? How could one accept that over logic ? I do not know...

From within the thick woods and high grass and bushes on both sides of the road, the village appeared. Surrounded by trees and weeds, with the hay roofs of the hut's beyond. While, some distance away, outside the village, a couple of carriages were stopped on the side of the road. Most certainly owned from the look of it, by thieves and cutthroats, as one does not come around these parts for civilization but rather the opposite. And not far from the road

they had set up a camp. From which Gerd expected to witness the usual activities, a band of merry lads and lasses such as them would take part in.

'Witcher ! Over here ! I want to have a few words with you.', yelled a man, waving as Gerd approached the camp site.

Gerd stopped on the side of the road, watching the camp, then got off his horse, looking at the man. 'What is it ?'.

'Are you looking for work ?', the stranger asked, approaching Gerd.

'Depends on the kind of work you talk about.'.

'The kind that's fit for a witcher.'.

'Which is ?'.

'That, we can't talk here. Follow me.'.

Gerd led his mare by the reins as he followed the stranger inside the camp. From the middle of the camp, music, and songs echoed loudly.

'What's the occasion ?', asked Gerd.

The stranger replied with a short laugh. 'Must there be one ?', he replied turning towards Gerd. 'We sing and drink, because we want to. Because it pleases us greatly. As you may have already noticed we're a bunch of merry men and women, of foreigners, thinkers and merchants. Travelling from village to village, in search for nothing but of other beautiful men and women. Life is far too short to be lived all in one place. And a family doesn't have to be tied by blood, but by friendship.'.

'Right. What's the work I am supposed to do ?'.

'Patience, my friend. You will have your-'.

'Listen. I don't have time to waste-', replied Gerd interrupting the stranger.

'You, my friend, are very tense and aggressive. I know the perfect medicine...'. The stranger stopped, turning towards the witcher. Moving his hand along Gerd's chest armor. 'You can have me or my sister...Or both if you prefer-'.

'Dearest brother. What have you brought here ? Hmm, a witcher...', said a dark haired woman, almost naked, if her body would've not been covered by a transparent red dress. Quite aroused by the look of it. She kissed her brother on the cheek, and then approached Gerd, while she subtly pinched her left erected nipple as she moved her hand to her hip. 'I want us to spend a mere night together, witcher. I promise you'll enjoy every moment of it...'.

'I told you. A job fit for a witcher.', added the brother, approaching as well, before being pushed away by his sister.

'He's all mine. If he desires that you join us later, I'll call for you...', the woman said, while her brother reached for the reins of Gerd's mare.

'Well, go on. I'll take good care of your mare...', the brother replied, noticing the witcher's subtle frown. 'What ?'.

'By taking care of my mare, you meant...'.

Confused about what the witcher implied. 'A bale of hay and water. What else ?', the man asked, puzzled, yet not long after he understood the witcher's scowl. 'Why-', the man began. 'Who would do that ?!', he continued, then left.

'You'd be surprised...', the witcher murmured, while the sister seemed rather amused.

Unable to truly explain how he ended up into this exact situation, Gerd joined the woman to her tent. 'Here we are.'. She said holding his hand, as they entered the tent. 'So, Gerd, shall we ?', she continued taking off her dress.

'How-'.

'...do I know your name ?', she added. 'Because I've heard of you.'. She changed her previous aroused tone to a more thoughtful one. As she reached for a silver goblet that contained wine, on a table not far from the entrance. 'Now, lets take that armor of yours off.'.

'Not how my contracts usually go...'.

'The only difference, is that you won't have to slay the monster...Besides that, everything is just what a witcher would do during a contract. Follow the trail while learning the nature of the creature. Then, begin the preparation before the fight. The Brewing and drinking of the required potions and apply the right oil to the silver blade. And finally, the battle...', she approached Gerd with a pleasant smile. Helping him to take his chest armor off. 'Thus far, you have followed the trail...But have been unable to identify the nature of the creature...', she continued taking the chest armor off, moving her right hand's fingers against his sternum, downwards. 'So, master witcher...What am I ?', she asked as her hand reached his trousers.

'From what I observed thus far...'.

'Yes...', she whispered, as her lips touched his collar bone.

'Due to the immunity to silver...'.

'Mhm...', she continued whispering, kissing the jugular area of his neck.

'And the lack of any reaction from my medallion...'.

'Wrong.', she responded as if asked, pushing herself away while holding her hands behind Gerd's head. Her left hand grabbed the back of his head. 'A job fit for a witcher...'.

However, little that might've reveal or mean to someone listening. It gave Gerd a shiver, that ran down his spine. 'A job fit for a witcher...'.

She moved away from him, taking another sip of wine. While Gerd realized what he had in front of him.

She looked at him, as she placed the goblet on the table, and smiled.

'That is correct.', she said, as she turned to face him. 'Huh. Is age that important?'. she asked approaching him. 'I know your age, yet you don't see me being bothered about it. Age for me and you, right now, is but a worthless number. It reveals absolutely nothing about us. You a result of mutation and I, member of a species beyond any human's limited comprehension. Yes. Would you like me to say it?'

'No.', he quickly replied. Sliding his hands down her back, clutching his fingers around her waist as they were heading towards the bed on the other side of the tent.

'I believe we are now entering the preparation stage...', she added with a whisper in Gerd's ear, after which she made a pirouette, then pushed Gerd on the bed, climbing on top of him.

Her pale skin, warm and soft, almost shined alike scales under the light of the candles. While her auburn eyes seemed to shift towards a crimson shade, as her curled dark hair fell around her face, shading them, making them shine in the dark. It was hard to place into words what her game did to his mind. He felt her as being all powerful while he felt completely powerless. It wasn't anything if nothing but the truth. His realization to her true nature would still send from time to time shivers down his spine. As the intensity of her being felt like a bolt of lightning striking his whole body. Her eye lashes revealed her eyes that harbored within them a kind of desire he had never experienced before. More than anything, it was the fact that she knew everything about those particular thoughts, which gave her even more power and control over him. Somehow to his surprise, this was an incredible source of arousal. The fact that she could see and know all he thought of, felt as if he had nothing to hide, which was true. Who thought that the lack of any secrets from someone felt as good as it did. Being completely naked, without any shield or armor, both literally and figuratively, could feel so deep and heavy, as if it could crush your chest at any given time, yet your entire being felt as light as a feather...

After a while she leaned her head next to Gerd's and softly whispered. 'Witcher, shall we begin...', allowing her lips fall upon his.

Their first of many, lasted around an hour. As now, both were laying on their back staring at the roof of the tent.

'I guess none of us won...', she added jokingly, turning to her right side, kissing his arm.

He murmured, staring at the canvas roof.

'I'll keep you all for myself...', she said raising from the bed.

'Is he-'

'Kairr ? Yes. Don't mind him...', she replied reaching for a goblet that contained water. Then, after she emptied it two times she returned to the bed. She sat down on the side of the bed,

then turned to Gerd and smiled. 'Kaela.'

She then laid down next to Gerd, resting her head on his arm.

'Kaela.', began Gerd. 'I-'

'I know. But, spend the night with me...', she replied, kissing the side of his mouth, then moved on to his lips. 'Let us belong to each other. Let us enjoy every part of each other...', she whispered, as her hand moved downwards.

She then climbed on top of him once again. Initiating one of many other carnal urges, that lasted till dawn.

The morning's first beam of light caught them right at the climax of their yearning. Kaela stood on top of Gerd, with her back arched and her head pushed back, while Gerd's left hand couldn't unpeel from her naked breast. As both let out intense breaths soon followed by a grunt and a moan.

She leaned upon Gerd, kissing his chest and after he took a deep breath, he moved a few locks of her curled dark hair, away from her face. 'I can't say I've met any other member of your kind, that-'

'You know you don't have to say a word...', she interrupted turning her head to rest her chin on his sternum. Her reddish lips were almost hypnotizing when she smiled. Combined with her black curly hair, and auburn-crimson eyes that were squinting at the same time with a slight smile, certainly as a response to whenever she found any entertaining lines of thought sliding through Gerd's mind. Added to her being more than the truth about her nature would let on. 'Hmm...', she murmured, staring into Gerd's eyes. 'Yet I understand it. And, regarding your earlier enquiry. We as any other being do tend to be from time to time, consumed by sexual desire. The answer is that, you, simply didn't ask...'

'That, I never did...'

Kaela lifted herself up, and sat on the side of the bed. 'You're leaving...'

'I have to find that man-'

'You don't have to do anything. I've seen everything about-'

'I'm a witcher. If I stop, what will I do ?'

'Anything-'. she began with great eagerness to explain, then stopped as if she had lost it all.

'Kaela. I know nothing else, but this. I'm good at it. No witcher has ever died a peaceful death. And I do not wish for one. Such a death is for the weak. Besides, I was born on the Skellige Isles after all.'

'A bunch of savages...', she replied looking at Gerd. 'You are nothing like them. That foolish desire of dying in battle is the only thing you share with them.'. She continued with a deep breath and then smiled. 'But, it is what it is...'

She then stood up from the bed, and walked to the table, from which she picked up the reddest apple and took a bite from it.

'Ah ! You two must've had a great night...!', said Kairr, entering the tent. 'I am disappointed you didn't care enough to include me as well. But I'm glad you two had a magnificent time together.', he continued approaching the table and poured himself some wine. 'Are you leaving ?', he asked, seeing as Gerd was getting dressed.

'I have work to do.'

'The path calls ! However, do consider coming back. You are more than welcomed here.', Kairr began, then softly smiled as he caught wind of his sister's displeasure. 'Just look at my lovely sister. She's glowing. You've satisfied her every need I see, only if you could do the same for me...Ah ! But that is such a shame, as my sweet sister seems to want you all for herself. She never liked to share...!'

'Get out...!', replied Kaela, pointing toward the exit.

'As you command, sweet sister.', responded Kairr, leaving the tent.

Gerd, now placing the swords on his back, approached Kaela. 'I-'. She turned and grabbed one of the sword's straps, pulling Gerd closer for a kiss.

'Return to me, once you finished the contract...!'

Once again on the path, Gerd was heading for Erde. The village was of small size, yet from what he heard in the camp, most people around these parts came here for the good works of a small shop, that makes and sells, from boots, belts and jackets to every kind of item that is manufactured or could be dressed in leather. That could benefit Gerd as well, since his sword straps were worn and a set of new ones would be more then required, after the exposure to all that sand and hot sun back in Zerrikania.

As he entered the village, that contained four huts, he got off the saddle and left his mare near a watering spot. And was shortly approached by a couple, that walked down from their porch.

'Good day, sir.', said the husband. 'What do you seek here ?'.

'He's a witcher ! Are you goddamn blind ?! He came to slay a monster...!', said the wife following behind him.

'What monster you crazy hag ? There's none here !'.

She clicked her tongue, while slapping her husband left ear. 'He came for the werewolf-!'

'Dammit woman ! You fuckin' dumb believing that horseshit. You and that numskull, Lena, spreading who know what madness goes through that head of hers. Go back in the damn house !'.

'Is there a contract on the werewolf?', asked Gerd, for if there's none here, there could be one in the closest village.

'There's no damn werewolf here !'.

'How would you know ?!'.

'Are you deaf woman ! I told you to go in the damn house !', he replied, then grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her towards the porch, making her fall near the steps.

'Get in there and shut up ! Anyway, fuckin' crazy woman...'. She then got up mumbling, slamming the door behind her. 'Don't slam the damn door you fuckin' harpy ! For you ain't the one who's fixin' it !'.

She then threw through the window a frying pan at him then a pair of boots. 'I should've married your damn brother !'.

'Should've married your damn brother...', he mumbled rolling his eyes back. 'He's fuckin' dead !', he yelled throwing the frying pan back.

'I'm looking for-', attempted Gerd before being interrupted.

'I rather take death over you !', she yelled sticking her head out the window.

'Gods give me strength...', he mumbled. 'Shut up !'.

'I'll damn cut you in your sleep ! And feed you your damn worthless prick and balls !',

'I'll feed you my fist if you ain't gonna shut up !'.

After a while the two calmed down, allowing Gerd to ask about the girdler or cobbler's shop. 'Wha-What did you want to know ?', asked the husband.

'About a shop-'.

'That's the small hut over there...', responded the man, pointing towards a hut on the other side of the village.

'Thanks. Farewell.'.

'Glad to be of help.', replied the man, walking back on the porch.

After witnessing that yelling contest between the two villagers, he went to the gridler's shop. Where he planned to ask about Reginald as well. Behind the hut were a couple of medicinal plants, and a few crates that smelled of alcohol. Then as he opened the door, inside were laid on a chair a couple of prepared leathers and near the legs of the chair, two pairs of boots. From behind a wall the owner of the shop appeared.

'Welcome. What can I do for you ?', she asked hauling a crate containing wolfsbane and placed it near the wall.

'A new set of straps for my swords.'

'Anything else ?'.

'Just a question. If, of course you wish to help me...', replied Gerd, while the girl nodded her head in agreement. 'I am looking for a man, dark haired, sturdy, scarred left ear, and a missing middle finger. Do you know anyone of the sort ? I think he goes by as Reginald ?'.

'Hmm. I think you just described Aidan. Reginald is his middle name, I think...Anyway, he's not here. You should check his hut though. It's outside of the village, in the woods to the east. There's a path behind my garden that'll lead you to it. He lives there. Some days he comes here to help me with the shop.', she said, as Gerd gave her his swords for measurements. 'I saw you talking with Ulf and Melva.'

'You should put up a sign outside. I would have known where to come without asking...'

'Sorry, I got my reputation recently. But I did gather the money for a sign. I just need to go in Brunwich to make it...'. She looked up at Gerd through a few locks of her golden hair, then straightened herself, pulling those locks behind her ear. 'I know it seems unfit for me to ask...But, could you help me with it ? I have a lot of work, and-'.

'Fine. I wanted to ride that way anyway.'

'For that werewolf ?', she asked, looking back at Gerd.

'Mhm. Do you know anything about it ?'.

'I don't. This is the second time I heard of it, the first being from Melva...', she leaned behind the counter and picked up a sheet of paper. 'Here's the model for the sign. The blacksmith's shop is near the entrance, a dwarf owns it. His name is Turmir.'

Gerd took the sheet of paper and placed it in a pocket on his belt. 'I see you're a herbalist as well ?'.

'And Alchemist...I plan to make enough coin to afford a life in the city. Buy a small place and set up shop...'

'It's a good idea. And it might work...'

'I hope it does. I can't stand this place anymore...', she shook her head, and with a light smile continued. 'The straps should be ready in a couple of hours.', she said, handing Gerd his swords back.

'Good. I'll visit Reginald's hut until then, and with luck, check if there's any witcher work in Brunwich.'

'Alright. Later then.', she replied as Gerd walked out the door of the small shop.

He turned left and walked behind the shop, where he found the path that the girl mentioned. With a set of fresh tracks leading into the woods. It took some time to reach the hut. But alas

he arrived at the doorstep of the house of this man, Reginald. Gerd knocked but no one answered, and whilst doing so he noticed the door's slight nudge, as if it were unlocked.

'Anyone home ?', Gerd asked as he cracked the door open, walking towards a table in the middle of the main chamber. Clean, if not for a few breadcrumbs, on the right side of the table, near a small basket, covered by a folded towel.

Yet, as he was looking around the chamber, he noticed a faint sound from the other room, and proceeded to find what it was. Though, as he approached the opened door, a pair of claws slid across his chest armor, followed by a growl. 'Hrrgghrrrr !'. Quickly after came another attack, this time hitting Gerd, who managed to make the sign of quen before the strike, sending him through the wall behind him, stopping into a tree outside. As the assailant came out through the hole in the wall, growling once again. 'Be gone, witcherr !'.

'I just want to talk !', Gerd replied lifting himself up from the ground.

'They always doo !', he growled as he approached, while Gerd, seeing no other alternative for the time being, unsheathed his silver sword.

Shards of Truth

.XXIV. Shards of Truth.

'In the first years, there was not even a mere thing that seemed to indicate as if I had revealed to myself the truth behind the things I once held in such high regard. Hammered, in place by the education my sweet parents gave me, which to their mind was proper and very much needed, as I proven to be quite naughty from an early age.

When I turned twenty, more exactly a few weeks later, I explained it to my older sister. Who at the time was eager to be wedded to an idiot she considered a handsome young man. We both stayed in Lan Exeter as it was the will of 'our' strict father that she completes her studies there, then, she can leave Kovir for good, if she wished so. We were sitting in the kitchen, at the table near a open window, through which I watched the merchants going about their wares in the crowded market, across the Great Canal. While among the chatter coming from the noisy market there were the seagulls and the rowing of the gondolas passing beneath the window.

'What were you thinking ? If I knew you'd do such things I would've never let you stay here with me...', she said as she held a wet piece of cloth with which she cleaned my swollen face. 'You told me and our parents you'd respect their wishes to continue your studies here, and find work in the city. And, look at what you do...', she continued wiping the dried blood off my cheeks and jaw. 'You can't keep getting yourself in trouble. For there'll be a time when, Uncle Wuin won't be there to get you out.'

I scoffed, watching a gondola passing beneath the window, on which a fair haired young woman, dressed elegantly, surely, some banker's daughter looked back at me with disgust. 'Uncle Wuin...What else would he do ? Besides, fuckin' and drinkin' his ass off'-

'If he wasn't there, you would be in a prison cell right now.', she replied, as she nudged my head. 'If father gets word of this-'

'He won't' care. I-', I interrupted before being stopped by my sisters squinting eyes.

'He will.', she replied almost repulsed by my previous words, hitting the table and grabbing my hand. 'He sent you here to make something of yourself. Something respectable, of importance. If he didn't care he would've let you go free. And like the rabid animal you are, by now you would've been in plenty of trouble. So, stop getting into cockfights over nothing, and try for once to be something more than the idiot you are...'

She stared at me while she squeezed my wrist as I looked at the gondolas passing by the window on the Great Canal. 'Galodo...Promise me.', she said, and as I didn't turn or said anything, she pulled on my wrist. 'Promise me...'

I looked in her emerald eyes, that were shining, as they were filled with tears and murmured. 'I'll try...'

'He had an interesting life, didn't he ?', asked Tara, riding alongside Gerd, as he closed and handed back to her Galodo's journal, while Maa eased her pace to let the two catch up.

'You two, keep up.', said Maa. 'It seems we'll stop before the crossing...!'

'So, Gerd. Have you ever been to Lan Exeter ?', Tara asked placing the journal in one of her saddle's pockets.

'Once.'.

'Was it nice ?', asked Maa.

'The city, yes. The people, not so much, at least those that I met. Kovir has been lately dubbed as the richest of the northern kingdoms. As almost eighty percent of the gold comes from the mines within the Dragon Mountains. Naturally, every man and woman in the capitals are rich and spoiled, but to my surprise not greedy. Which, obviously, means they pay the best. I won't deny that I made plenty of coin during my stay there, but I doubt I would attempt to visit Lan Exeter again...!'

The Zerrikanians and the witcher were now almost at the footsteps of the green hills, traveling near the northern banks of the Naa'l. From where one was able to see the snowy peaks of the Fhuil Mountains.

The screeching of the silver coming out of the scabbard, was in an almost perfect resonance with the growls of the beast standing in front of the witcher.

'He sent for my head ?! Didn't hee !?', the beast snarled. 'I'll tearr you to piecess ! Hghrrr ! Thenn I'll do the same to himm !'.

It had been not hard to deduce that the man named Reginald and the beast that stood in front of the witcher were two sides of the same coin.

'No one sent for me.', answered Gerd, holding his sword high with both hands, pointed at the beast as he planned to walk a semi-circle around it. However, when Gerd made his third step, he snapped, slashing half of the tree trunk behind Gerd. The witcher evaded the attack by rolling left, quickly regaining the previous stance and paced his steps.

'Lies !', he screamed launching towards Gerd. 'What other business would a witcher do in these woods ?'.

The witcher jumped back and then rolled left. 'A couple of questions-'.

He growled. 'Questions ?'.

'That's all I want.'.

'Questions about what ?'.

'Your short visit to a shop in Novigrad.'

The muscles near the neck area of the beast tensed, then relaxed, as he let out a long breath. He then leapt towards Gerd with great speed, who swayed his sword diagonally, which, the monster avoided smoothly, slashing the witcher's chest armor as he grabbed on the chain mail around his shoulders with it's claws and threw him a few meters away from the hut, into the woods.

Bleeding, Gerd, landed on his back and rolled a couple of times, until he stopped near a tree trunk. However, as he raised his head, he saw the werewolf rushing at him. He quickly moved his eyes towards his sword, which was a few steps near the roots of another tree.

He tensed his jaw, as he took a gulp of air. 'Fuck it !'. When Reginald attempted to leap once more, Gerd casted a powerful version of Aard, blowing the beast away as if it weighed nothing, across the woods, through the trunk of an arbor. The witcher then lifted himself up, picked his silver sword from the ground, and walked towards the beast.

It got up growling and sneering then charged towards Gerd.

When the beast tried to slash again, Gerd avoided it with a pirouette and a diagonal cut across the back of the monster. Then he followed and cut the tendons behind the knee of the beast, making it fall to the ground.

The werewolf growled as he tried to get up, but was once again blown into a tree by Gerd's Aard spell. Reginald hit the tree trunk horizontally, and as he fell to the ground Gerd aimed and shot with the crossbow an arrow into the monster's chest, that as he fell it plunged it's front arms and good hind leg into the ground, and jumped towards Gerd. Who threw his crossbow and grabbed the silver sword with both hands and slashed the beast's abdomen so deep it's whole entrails came out.

The werewolf growled as it began to shift back into it's human form.

'Who told you to get the poison !'. Gerd growled, as he cleaned the blood off the silver blade with his forearm. 'I didn't want it to end this way, but as of now, I'm all out of patience...Speak !', he continued making the sign of Axii, as he put his silver sword back in the scabbard.

'A man. The lackey of someone named Arlow...Red haired. Looked clean, neat, unlike the others...Had a sword with the head of an eagle on the pommel.', spoke Reginald, as he held on his insides. 'H-His men kidnapped my daught-'.

'I heard what I needed to know...!', interrupted Gerd, placing an arrow in his crossbow. 'To much too late.'. He said, as he shot the arrow in the man's head.

Gerd then walked towards the hut, where he took his ruined chest armor off and tended to his wounds, then he planned to go back to the village of Erde.

Arlow. Surely, Francess might know what to do with this information, and could connect it to some other ends that until now didn't quite fit. Gerd found it less than satisfying that his trip

here and some of the complications that followed had been nothing but a waste of energy and time. His jacket had been ruined, and the one that did so, was dead and decided to shift back to it's human form while dying. He had no knowledge if there had been a contract on a werewolf in Brunwich, but, if there is one, he won't be able to claim the reward without proof...

Thus, he lifted himself from the stool he sat on as he cleaned his wounds, that he wrapped with a cloth he found in the hut. He managed to sew some of the torn material on his jacket, then he took his belongings and walked back on the path towards the village.

The Woodland's Mistress

.XXV. The Woodland's Mistress.

From time to time, a drop of blood would break from his finger tips and fall down on the narrow path that led back to Erde.

The fight with the werewolf, Reginald, only reminded him of how much he missed wearing a proper armor set. As his witcher armor would've never allowed the claws to dig this deep or cause as much damage. Thus, it was obvious that before he would set sail for Skellige, he had to find an armorsmith that would have the ability and the tools necessary to craft him a new set of armor.

Also these recent wounds, meant he would have to ease his pace a bit. Not really an option in the current situation, for he was sure that this individual hailed Arlow, won't just share the information he requires out of the kindness of his heart...

When he eventually reached Erde, in front of the gridler's shop several people were gathered, as if they were waiting for someone. Clients, guessed Gerd, as he walked past them.

'Master Witcher !', yelled a woman, rushing towards him. 'Master !', she called again.

'What is it ?', replied Gerd, turning.

'I'm in need of your services.', the young woman answered.

'With ?', Gerd asked coldly.

'M-My future to be husband has gone missing. Please. I-'

'When ?', he continued with the same tone.

'Four days ago. He went as he did every mornin', into the woods north of here, huntin'. But, didn't return.', the young woman answered again looking at her feet, clutching her fingers around the sides of her skirt, as a tear dropped from her left eye and fell on the dusty ground. 'I- love him...'

From those that gathered in front of the shop, an old woman approached the bride, followed by a younger one. 'Oh, sweet child...', the old woman whispered while moving the young woman's head to her shoulder. 'Go to your sister, I'll take care of the rest...', she continued, watching as the young woman walked to her sister, then looked at Gerd. 'Listen here ! I need that wonderful child to stop weeping cascades of tears, and you to find that damned soft-headed idiot or, if he's actually dead, his fuckin' corpse. So, how much will it be ?'.

'I won't take the contract.'

'Your kind doesn't fancy coin anymore ? What ? You bastards grow it in trees nowadays ?', she replied while she placed her hands on her hips. 'How 'bout I look at that wound of yours ? I'll patch you up. That why you don't want to take the contract. Ain't it ? So, how much ?'.

'Eighty.'.

'I ain't gonna give you a copper more than sixty.', replied the old woman.

Seeing that the old woman wouldn't budge a copper more, he agreed to take the contract. 'Fine.'.

'Good. Now, take off that armor, and go sit on that stump over there.'.

Gerd took his chest armor off, and sat on a stump near the gridler's shop. While the old woman went to the gridler's hut to get some bandages and alcohol needed to clean the wound.

'What happened ?', asked the gridler, as she approached. 'Did you find Aidan ?'.

'I did not.'.

'He might be out hunting. You could check on him later...'. she responded, unsure.

'I might.'.

'Well, I better go finish your straps. Talk later ?', she replied, then proceeded to the entrance of the shop.

'Sure.'.

The old woman returned shortly after with the necessary items. She ripped a piece of cloth in two and folded it, took out the cork of the bottle and poured over the dressing. Then looked at Gerd. 'Why are you lookin' at me like that ? If it worries you, I got enough experience as I've done this plenty for me' husband.'.

'Was he in the army ?'.

'No. Just a drunken-fool.', she replied while she cleaned the wounds. 'But, the most handsome lad in these cursed parts. I loved that man 'till his last day in this world. He still was a fool and a drunk though.', she sighed and then continued. 'He died twenty summers ago. Peacefully in his sleep.', she then looked at the young woman. 'Youth and love blind like no other...'. '.

'About the spouse. You think he got cold feet ?'.

'Who knows. Might've been killed by a damn boar. There's plenty of em' round here. 'Sides, he ain't that great of a hunter as that naive sweet lass thinks. Just a few springs ago, he got chased out of the woods by a damned deer. He claimed it had antlers as big as a dog, and was taller than a horse, but my grandson saw him run out of the woods like a scared fool with nothing giving chase, yelling nonsense...'. '.

Gerd's mind already thought of a Leshen.

'After four days one would call me lucky, if I am to find his boots...'

'Meanin' ?'.

'If something big got him, there won't be much left.'

'We haven't had such beasts 'round here for some time now. 'Sides wouldn't there be more folk missing ?'.

'There aren't ?'.

'None. We would've known.', the old woman said as she finished cleaning the wounds. 'I see you cauterized the deeper ones...'

'It's better than stitching them. This way I can still have a somewhat unrestricted movement.', Gerd replied, as the woman applied an ointment made from honey. Then followed with the clean dressings over the wounds.

'You should change them in a couple of days.'

'Thank you.', said Gerd raising from the stump, picking up his chest armor. 'Where will I find you when I'm done ?'.

'Brunwich. At the hut that's right of the western gate.'

'Is there anything that could help me identify him ?',

'Black haired, scrawny. He wore a washed up black tunic and had a sword with his name engraved on the pommel, Irwin.', answered the old woman.

'Did he use to go deep in the woods ?', asked Gerd, adjusting the straps of his swords.

'Not since he ran out of them screaming...'

'Right. Well then, I better be on my way. So long.'

Gerd went to his mare from where he picked up some vials and herbs and fed her some hay. 'Stay put, girl. I'll be back soon.', he said, petting his mare's neck.

Then left the village and headed on foot north towards the woods of Brunwich. He entered the village and went to Turmir, the dwarven blacksmith to leave an order for the gridler's shop sign. He also checked the notice board for work, but there was no werewolf notice or anything else besides the contract he was already working on. Therefore he then decided to go look for Irwin's tracks, and find what happened to him.

It was past noon, when he entered the woods north of Brunwich and found no other tracks besides those made by boars and deer. Fortunately as he walked further north, he found some

tracks that were at least three days old, that led west. He followed them for some time and reached the ruins of what once seemed to be an elven structure.

More than half of the structure was collapsed, but, a single column was still left standing, solely holding the eastern side of the ruin up for some decades now. The floor still had managed to keep its color despite the attempts of time and rain, combined with the sun and wind's constant gnawing to render it obsolete, to wash it away and let it be lost, forever. Portraying the figure of the sun during the spring's solstice on the eastern side, where a bit of the roof was extending over, offering a slight shelter to this forgotten tapestry of the sun. The ruins offered Gerd an insight to a world that is now long forgotten. A world without humans and wilters, a world in which by the Elven history east of the Great Sea, was the closest this side of the world has ever been to paradise. Now, among the ancient trees that still remember, laying here, it's what's left of that world. Lost and almost forgotten, still enduring the trials of time...

After a few moments he spent looking around the ruins, he resumed his attention on the tracks he followed here. Gerd found none around or near the ruins, but he did find a door leading beneath them. And as he approached he noticed the footprint of a muddy boot, leading beyond the door, beneath the elven ruins. As he approached he heard the voice and the moans of a man, followed by some giggling and a short laugh, succeeded by a louder moan. Gerd unsheathed his silver, and burst through the door.

To his surprise he stumbled into something that was nothing of the sort he anticipated.

Gerd cleared his throat while sheathing his sword. 'Irwin?'. He asked as he saw a dark tunic laid on a chair near the head of the bed and next to it, a sword leaned against the dark brick wall.

'Yes?', the man replied.

'Is this what you've been doing in the last four days?'

'Hmm, yes...!'

'What do you want?', asked the auburn haired woman that sat on top of him, more specifically a succubus. Fair skinned, with a curvaceous body and as she raised from the bed with a jiggle of her breasts, and walked toward Gerd, he noticed the rest of her attractive features. Such as her auburn eyes, prominent cheek bones, square jaw, red voluptuous lips and marks she had drawn on her smooth skin, of the same color as her lips, consisting of a line coming from her lower lip, down her neck and around her breasts, and continued downwards to her hips, and disappear as it advanced lower. 'Go on, tell me what-!'

'I was looking for him. His family and beloved said he went missing four days ago. They hired me to find him, or whatever was left of him...!', Gerd interrupted looking at Irwin.

'Really?', he answered, surprised. 'I was going to return tonight.'.

'So you came here to...!'

'Yes. I came to see Zora.'

'Well, he was clearly not harmed.', replied Zora, then she walked toward Irwin and kissed him. 'Go on. Go to your wife. But do come by again. Alright ?'.

'Alright.', replied Irwin, excited.

'Now go put some clothes on.', she said, slapping his back as he went to get dressed. 'Witcher.', she continued, turning to Gerd.

'So, you're the 'deer' that scared him out of the woods...'

'Quite. Anyhow...Why don't you stay a while...Let Irwin go home by himself. As you and I, have a warm bath...and-', Zora said, taking Gerd's left hand into hers, rubbing the back of his hand against her lower area, before being interrupted.

'I would like to, but sadly, I'll have to turn down your invitation.', Gerd replied, while she raised his left hand near her mouth, licking his knuckles.

She smiled pleasantly. 'It's fine. You know where to find me...', she whispered, kissing Gerd on the cheek. She then walked towards Irwin, who was now dressed. 'Well, I guess I'll see you soon, my dear.'

'You will, my sweet. I won't take long. A few days at least. Then I'll return to you.'

'Wonderful. I'll crave your warmth, your entire being while you're gone.'

'Oh, my sweetest plum...I'll miss you too.', he replied, as Zora slowly reached for the top of his head while kissing him, and pushed it downwards between her legs. Moving her left one over his right shoulder, as she stared straight at Gerd, biting on her index finger.

'Irwin-', called Gerd before being interrupted by a Irwin's hand.

From between Zora's legs he murmured something. As he moved his hand along her left leg, that she had placed over his shoulder, until he reached her butt cheek, around which he clamped his fingers. While the other alike his mouth, played with her lower parts. Soon everything reached to an end as Zora let out a long moan, while she held Irwin's head between her legs. Trembling and throbbing as she tightened her abdomen, letting out a long exhale at the end. Then she raised Irwin from between her legs, kissing him.

She took a long breath, and smiled. While Irwin turned and walked towards the door.

'Let's go, witcher.', said Irwin opening the door.

'So long.', said Gerd following Irwin out, closing the door behind him.

They both walked back to the village and none of them said anything for a while.

'What are we going to tell them ?', asked Irwin, walking in front of Gerd.

'You had four days and didn't bother to find something until now ? '.

'Well, no...Think of something, will you ?', said Irwin.

'Any suggestions ?'.

'I guess...I got lost, or was trapped somewhere...I don't know...', Irwin replied scratching the top of his head.

'You don't smell like someone who's been trapped or kept somewhere for days...!'

'What do you mean ?', he asked stopping.

'You smell of perfume. You are uninjured, and look too clean.'.

'Well, we can fix that !'.

'We ?'.

'Yes. Hit me.'.

'What ?'.

'Come on. You said I am uninjured. Just a punch. Hit me in the nose, it bleeds pretty easily.', replied Irwin, squinting his eyes. 'Not hard though...!'

'Alright.', said Gerd, then punched Irwin in the face, making him fall down.

'I said not hard !', yelled Irwin, holding his bleeding nose, lifting himself from the ground.

'It bleeds alright...!'

'I told you it would ! Now, let's get rid of that perfume...', he continued looking around. 'Aha ! There is a pond not far from here... I could take a dip in that and we're done !'.

'Lead the way...!'

'This way !', Irwin said, as Gerd followed. 'So what beast did this to me ? A-a troll ? A nasty pack of drowners ? A griffin ?!'

'Bandits.', answered Gerd.

'Oh...That works as well, I guess.'.

'If it was to be one of the three you mentioned, you would've been a turd by now...!'

Irwin laughed awkwardly. 'I would've, wouldn't I...!'

They stopped talking after that, until they reached the pond. Situated beneath a hill, from which it seemed to collect the water, probably from an almost depleted spring as well.

'Here we are !', said Irwin.

'Well, go on...!'

'Fine...!', he replied, walking in the water, until it reached his neck.

'That's enough...!', said Gerd, watching from ashore. 'Come out.'

'I'm coming...!', Irwin replied, turning back. 'It's quite muddy.', he continued as he advanced out of the water. 'Witcher !', he screamed then was suddenly pulled in the water.

'Dammit !', cursed Gerd rushing in the water where he last saw Irwin and advanced a bit searching for something to grab. When he finally did manage to get hold of him he dragged Irwin out of the pond as quick as he could. Throwing him near a tree, as he coughed the water out, while Gerd unsheathed his silver sword.

From the dirty water of the pond a nasty red and dark skinned water hag burst out, trying to get Gerd with a vertical slash of her long claws. The witcher responded with a slash across her face, cutting her mandibulae clean off, then jumped back. She made an obnoxious screech and charged towards Gerd, who moved aside and cut through the water hag's right arm, then used his Aard sign to push her away from Irwin, making her fall. Gerd quickly moved above her and stabbed her in the chest.

'By the gods !', said Irwin approaching. 'What was that ?'.

'A water hag.', answered Gerd, sheathing his sword.

'Well...Thank you.', replied Irwin coughing.

'Right. Let's get you back to the village.'

'Alright.', replied Irwin looking back at the corpse of the monster the witcher slew.

After a while they arrived in the village. Irwin now looked and smelled like someone that had a near death experience. Still Gerd wasn't sure if Irwin won't do more visits to Zora, as he doubted Irwin learned anything from all of this...

'Irwin !', his beloved called as she sprang up from a chair as soon as she laid eyes on him.

'Mira !', he replied when he heard her call, quickening his steps.

'Are you alright ? What happened ? I was so worried !', she said wrapping her arms around his back.

'I'm sorry. Bandits took me captive...!'

'Oh.', she sighed as she hugged and kissed him. 'Thank you !', she said as Gerd approached.

'There's no need for that. I'll go take my coin. Take care you two.', Gerd replied heading for the old woman's hut, who was waiting on the porch.

'It seems you have found that dimwit...', she said sitting on a rocking chair. 'Here's your reward.', she continued grabbing the pouch from a table near her, and throwing it towards Gerd. 'By the way. The dwarf, Trumir, finished that sign. I sent my grandson to deliver it to Erde.'

'Thanks. Farewell.', he said after catching the pouch the old woman threw.

Therefore all he had to do now was go back to Erde. From where he'd have to ride to Novigrad, to ask Francesa about another man, named Arlow. This far it seemed that if he was to find the location of this man, he would get yet another meaningless name out of him that would only prolonged this contract even more...

Thus, when he reached the village of Erde, he went to the girdler's shop to pick up his promised payment for getting her sign.

The owner was outside already trying to find the perfect place to hang the sign.

'You're back.', she said, as she went inside the hut and Gerd followed. 'Here, as promised.'

'Thanks.'

'I'd say, today proved to be a pretty productive day for you...', she said smiling.

'I guess.'

'Well, here are your new straps.', she replied, taking them from behind the counter, placing them on it.

'It wasn't dull for you either...', said Gerd, handing her his swords.

'You know I never told you my name...'

'I never asked...'

'True. But I usually do tell it to costumers. So, Ella.'

'Gerd. Nice to meet you, Ella.'

'Same.', she replied. 'Here you go. Good as new.'

'Thanks again.', said Gerd, placing on the counter the required amount of coin.

'You could go back to check on Aidan. He must be back by now...'

'I don't need to anymore. I've got the answers I needed.'

'Well, then that's good, I guess. I wished he would get to meet you. He's such a kind man. You two would get along rather well...'

'I bet he is. Well, I better be on my way.'

'Alright, take care. And do come back.'

'I will. So long.'

It was late in the afternoon when he got out of Ella's shop and went to get his mare. Who was eager to get out for a stroll, after staying all day near the watering spot. So he led her by the reins out of the village, where he jumped in the saddle, and rode to the city of Novigrad...

The Fatherless Seed

.XXVI. The Fatherless Seed.

What remains in this wretched world of the ones that had passed into the silent void ?

The seeds they have planted...

'Citizens ! Foreigners ! Vagrants ! Brothers and sisters ! Delight into the Eternal Flame, and it's holiness ! Let it satiate your hearts and allow it to become your guide, your beacon ! Pray and rejoice ! For it will shield you and those close to you from the corrupt and the sinful, from the creatures of the dark and practitioners of the blasphemous arts and rituals...', spoke the priest with a rugged voice, standing next to a bowl of fire. 'Brothers and sisters ! Keep the Eternal Flames burning in your homes, tend to them, and your home shall forever be peaceful. Your lives forever calm and full of joy. For those who tend to the flame...Only they and their kin shall thrive and prosper ! Relinquish the blasphemous doctrines, the vile and nefarious magic and the results of mutation, for they represent all that is wicked and evil. Foreigners ! Come. Enter...And relish upon these streets engulfed with the warmth and light of the Eternal Fire. You, have been steered by the Eternal Flames, They, have brought you here. Among the walls of this magnificent city. Rejoice ! For They have brought you to safety !'.

Early in the evening, just a few moments before dusk, Gerd arrived at the modest residence of his old friend, Fracness Rourterggest, north of the Tretogor Gate.

'Evening, witcher.', said one of Fracness's men as Gerd crossed the street. Dark haired, clean shaven and dressed in black.

'Evening, Loeb.', Gerd replied approaching.

'If you're looking for Fracness, he isn't home at the moment-'.

'Where's he at then ?'.

The man called Loeb, pulled out of his right pocket, a red envelope. 'Here. He expected you'd show up this late, and left this invitation for you.'.

'Invitation to what ?', replied Gerd taking the envelope.

'To a rather refined party, held in Gildorf at the Passiflora.'.

'Refined ?'.

'Indeed. For a certain number of important individuals from across the city, Redania and not only, are present.'

'And he thought I'd fit right in, didn't he ?'.

'Quite.', Loeb replied.

'Did he mentioned anything else, perchance ?'.

'Several things. First of all, he advised me to suggest a bath, before attending. Second, he left some clothes fitting for the nature of the previously mentioned party. That naturally, you, should wear. Third, grooming-'.

'I understand the reasons for a bath-'.

'If you understand that, then you understand the rest as well...'

Gerd did not reply as he followed Loeb inside.

'Fourth, weapons are not allowed. You could leave them here, or at the Passiflora upon entrance. I'd suggest you leave them here-'.

'I could also wait here 'till morning.'.

'He insisted you attend-'.

'Of course he did...Anything else ?'.

'That's all. I have already told Ysabel to prepare your bath upstairs. You should head up there. It must be ready by now. Your clothes are on the bed, and should you choose to leave your weapons here, there's a chest in front of the bed that you can use.', answered Loeb, while they both stopped as they got out of the hallway and stepped into the main chamber.

'Answer me this. Why would those 'important individuals' allow a witcher to enter their party ?'.

'Several of those individuals are old acquaintances of yours. Rumors regarding your presence in the city hasn't passed unnoticed. You have powerful friends...'

'The only people I was once able to call friends, have died a long time ago. Don't pretend to know me, Loeb. For you know nothing.'.

'You're right, I do not. But, I know some of them owe you a great deal of things. I know I do, and so does Fracess. Yet, unlike us, they can repay you.'.

'You paid me coin. That was good enough.'.

'Gerd. If it weren't for you I would've been burned on a pyre that night. And Fracess and I would've never been able to know-'.

'Fine.', interrupted Gerd heading towards the stairs. 'I'll attend.'

'Good. But I want you to know, that you still have some friends left. True friends. That's the best I and Francedess can offer, for we can never repay you. There's not enough coin, nor gold ore left to make it, in all the koviri mines. For nothing can be ever able to fulfill such great amount.', Loeb replied as Gerd walked upstairs.

'Right...', Gerd murmured.

Throughout centuries, Novigrad, became known as The Free City, and all the same home and cradle of the religious cult of the Eternal Fire. That within mere centuries firmly yet so tightly wrapped their hands around the city's throat and Redania whilst spreading as far as Kovir, Kaedwen, and even as south as the southern shore of the Yaruga. Once considered by several heads of state, scholars, philosophers and druids, a rather extremist advocate of racism while favoring the ideology of oppression against practitioners of magic, and products of magic. Fearing it would divide the populace while being a source of prejudice among the citizens regarding race, and that it could result into violent movements against those that have affiliations with magic, mages or witchers. Which in the following decades proved to be true, as the cult's beliefs became laws within the walls of Novigrad, while the hierarchy stated the establishment of their own militia. The Temple Guard and The Order of the Flaming Rose, as the first's duty was to protect the Temple Isle, and the other's to defend the downtrodden, spread the belief of the Eternal Fire, while also stomping disbelievers across Redania and the Northern Kingdoms. The Order, was unaffected and unhinged by politics and laws but those of the Eternal Fire, meaning they were able to kill and persecute anyone that mocked the Eternal Flame, mages, non-humans, even scholars and alchemists, all the while acting as fair knights that fought against the evil and the wicked.

Therefore in the late 11th and early 12th century, stating that Novigrad is a free city, was a rather cruel irony. For the Church of the Eternal Fire allowed and in some cases dictated the so called abnormal creatures that entered or resided in the city to be mocked and aggressed.

Nowadays, early in the 13th century, due to the changing of the Church's Hierarchy, led to a rather tame fight against non-humans, magic and those that are results of it.

Later that same evening, a couple of clouds darkened the sky, while from east a mist had settled upon the sea.

'Loeb.', said Gerd as he reached the bottom of the staircase. 'I'm leaving.'

'Dressed like that?', Loeb asked while glancing over the rugged armor Gerd wore.

'Mhm.'

'Well, Francedess stated you'd refuse to wear them anyway. At least I tried. However the sword-'
'.

'I'm not going to walk through Novigrad unarmed. Nor am I going to enter the Passiflora without them.'

'But-'

'Not gonna happen.', Gerd responded, taking a couple of steps within the main chamber as Loeb followed behind.

'Well then, are you hungry ? I could make some-'

'I'm not, thanks. I better leave towards Gildorf...'

'Alright then.', replied Loeb, taking a couple of steps away from the witcher. 'I guess you'll be returning here after ?'

'I won't.'

'Then, so long.', said Loeb, following Gerd toward the door.

'Farewell, Loeb.', Gerd replied, heading north towards the district of Gildorf.

This side of the city was calm and quiet at this time of the night. However, as he advanced north, more and more people filled the streets.

Not long after he arrived at the Passiflora. Where leaning on the balcony's balustrade were three courtesans, which waved and smiled as he approached the brothel. A couple of steps, beneath the balcony, in front of the establishment were three men talking among themselves and from time to time, addressing the courtesan in front of them. As from the balcony one of the girls kept leaning past the balustrade to exchange a couple of words with her colleague, as the other two, laughed and mocked one of the men downstairs.

'Go home tiny Vinnie !', spoke one of them, as she pulled her top down, showing him her breasts. 'You ain't gonna get these tonight !'.

While further was a tall, blond haired, young man standing near the door. Gerd passed by them and addressed the man near the door of the brothel, showing him the red envelope.

'Sir. Welcome. I'm afraid I can't let you enter with the weapons-'

'I am not going to be staying long-', replied Gerd, attempting to persuade the doorman.

'What ! You let him in but not us !?', yelled a short and bald man, from among the three individuals that talked with the courtesan, then approached.

'This gentleman has an invitation. You do not. Please step away, sir.'

'Fuck his invitation ! You'd rather let a fuckin' mutant in there, than us !? Who knows what diseases he carries...'

'Sir.', replied the courtesan with a subtle yet ridiculing tone. 'Please, do go away.', she continued, walking in front of him. 'Our usual services are unavailable this evening-'.

'Shut up, whore !', the man replied striking the woman across her face with the back of his hand, making her fall next to the steps beneath the door. 'Oy ! Witcher, how 'bout you give me that invitation of yours, huh ?', he continued approaching. 'Me and my, associates, need it more then you do...So, be kind and hand it over.', he said, and smiled as he looked at his pals.

'Sir, leave at once.', said the doorman, helping the courtesan get up.

Gerd looked at the man that guarded the front door, then at the woman that the bald individual struck. As a string of blood was flowing down on her chin from the corner of her mouth, then back at the young man, who's eyes and face seemed to ask the witcher to do something.

'Come on, freak. Hand it over before me and my associates, beat it off you-'.

'Sir. I'll call the guard-'.

'Shut it !', said the man, moving to strike the doorman, while pushing the witcher aside. Gerd caught him by the back of his head and jaw, lifted him up and threw him towards his mates.

'Leave.', replied Gerd, with a grunt. Watching as the man rolled back and stopped at the feet of his two friends.

'You made the wrong choice, pal.', the bald man replied getting up, then advanced towards the witcher.

Gerd swiftly avoided the man's punch by leaning left, while delivering one of his own to the man's right side, beneath the rib cage. Then as he's seen the other two pull out their knives he grabbed his crossbow, and shot two arrows, through one's left knee and the other's right foot. He then proceeded with a headbutt and another punch to the bald man's jaw, knocking him down.

'Take your associates and leave.', said Gerd, looking at the bald man, who stood on his all four and spat blood and a couple of his teeth on the cobblestone paved alley, while his friends bled and groaned a mere few steps away.

'I'll make sure you are hanged for this-', murmured the bald man, as he was trying to stand near a beam that was supporting the balcony, before Gerd kicked him in the torso, making him roll all the way to the other two.

'Fuck off !', Gerd continued as he watched the three men leave the front yard of the brothel.

'Thank you.', said the young man, while the woman nodded her head.

Right after, two other courtesans came out of the brothel and took their friend in.

'Ah, Dolores...!', said one of them, wiping the blood off her chin with a handkerchief. 'Quickly, before it bruises.'.

'You can go in as well, sir. I don't mind the swords anymore...!', said the young man, as Gerd nudged his head in gratitude then proceeded inside.

Within the brothel, Gerd noticed nobles and scholars, alchemists and several mages. As he advanced further towards the bar, he noticed a couple of familiar faces spread across the room downstairs. A certain red bearded nobleman, who was chatting with his employer, Claire Siggmariggen in one corner, opposed to the staircase. While a couple of steps from the door, he saw the scholar, Vasyl Shaltz, entertaining or being entertained by two women and further at a table near the stairs, was Francess. Who quickly noticed the witcher, and excused himself to those around the table, then walked towards Gerd.

'Ah, my friend. Welcome. I see you've made it. I, also see you chose not to wear the clothes I've left for you. I hoped you'd agree to wear something a bit more elegant for once.', he said, while with a squint of his right eye, he signaled the man tending to the bar, who stepped outside.

'I'm not a buffoon.'.

'By that logic I am one, and so is everyone else in here...!', Francess chuckled, leaning against the bar.

'Aren't you ? This whole party is a buffoonery and a jest, for you to flaunt your wealth and influence. As you drink, sing, fuck and talk about whatever fancies your mood. In conclusion a waste of time. However, that is not your case, as I know what you adore about such refined events. The rumors, the grudges, the ass-kissing, the backstabbing. Overall the joy of watching them compete over who's more relevant, more entitled. For the unrestrained showcase of egos and selfishness...!.

'True. It's like I've never left Nilfgaard. It feels a lot like home.', he replied smiling. 'How was your travel here...!.

'Calm and swift.', replied Gerd looking at two courtesans that were passing by.

'I heard of your brawl outside.'.

'A bunch of fools...!.

'Not all of them...But, that's an issue for another time. Anyway, how was your hunt ?'.

'Decent. It provided me, yet again, with another name.'.

'Which is ?'.

'Arlow.'.

Francess clicked his tongue. 'Suspected as much...!.

'You knew ?'.

'I had my suspicions.'.

'Alright. Cut the crap. What's this ? Why did you invite me here ?'.

'There's been a certain...Incident, that could benefit if someone like you would happen to lend a hand...!'

'Is that so...!'

'It is. But, we'll have to talk more about that later. Listen, I'll now go upstairs. You, remain here within the duration of this song and the next-!'

'What's with-'

'Do as I say. Two songs then you come upstairs. I'll explain everything there.', resumed Francess, then he left towards the stairs.

'Can I serve you anything ?', asked the bartender, as he returned behind the bar.

'A pint of mead.'.

'Right away, sir.'.

While the bartender filled a tankard with mead, he looked around the room, before being eyed by the scholar, Vasyl Shaltz.

'Here you go, sir.'.

'Thanks.', Gerd replied, placing five crowns on the counter.

He managed to take a good sip, before Vasyl approached the bar.

'Evening, witcher. It seems we meet again.'.

'Seems so...!'

'Quite surprised to see you at such events. I have to suspect it is business related ?'.

'It is. What about you ?'.

'Same.', he replied looking at the two women he left at the table, then nudged Gerd's shoulder with his right hand. 'What do you think of them ? Pretty things aren't they ?'.

'They are...!'

'Well, the one on the left is of Ofiri descent. While the other, Nilfgaardian. Ece and Klara.'.

'Exotic duo.'.

'Exactly. You should see them shed those clothes...Every inch, just the most pure kind of beauty a man could witness...!'

While the scholar kept describing the beauty of his companions, Gerd noticed two more men from the table Francess sat at, to go upstairs, and later they were followed by a woman that sat at a table on the other side of the room. He remarked that each did so within a couple of minutes between each other. Also the bard had finished his first song, and was now onto the second...

Oh, for last winter,

I loved a pretty maid...

I shivered at the touch of her soft lips,

Aweing with lust as in her auburn eyes I've gazed.

...

Her scarlet locks lightly fell alike curtains round our faces,

As our lips touched with a scorching passion

Her delicate being resting atop of me.

Her calm voice and soft moans a melody to hearken.

A kind of love one's rarely acquainted,

Out of fear of time and dawn,

As shiny rays slip from amidst gray clouds,

Beyond her window the nature's many songs,

Proclaiming an eternal change of seasons,

Yet, we refused to listen.

...

Oh, for last winter,

I loved a lovely maid...

I saw the nights wither with bliss,

As she unveiled the purest love's ways.

...

The spring had to come and stop our love's roaring flames,

For it's ardor melted the winter's frost.

T'was a winter neither shall forget.

As I am still haunted by her erotic figure

Each time I rest my eyes.

...

Oh, for last winter,

I loved a fair maid...

I've lost with her the count of time

For we spent in love's warmth, all the winter's coldest days.

...

And now I ache and yearn to meet her,

To feel such fervor just one more time,

For only then can I rest in peace,

Knowing, that I loved a maid so fine...

~ Last Winter ~

'If you simply desire one of them, just ask. I could rent a room upstairs, and all you have to do, is choose.', continued the scholar before pausing, while quickly, yet awkwardly turning to face Gerd. 'I'd like to continue this conversation. However, it seems, I have to rejoin them. Excuse me.', said the scholar, then returned to the table.

'Witcher !', happily yelled a certain red bearded noble, quickly approaching.

'Evgeni.', replied Gerd.

'Am I not happy to see you, friend ! How's business ?', he said, then addressed the bartender. 'Ale, now !'.

'Good.', Gerd answered, while Evgeni received his drink. After which the bartender was replaced by another, as he went upstairs as well.

'Ah ! You're still humble, I like that. Yet, I heard many rumors, saying you made plenty of coin recently...Thus I'd prefer to correct you, and say business is booming ! Cheers !', said the red bearded noble, knocking his tankard against Gerd's, then drank.

'How's that problem of yours ?', asked Gerd, drinking as well.

'It is, our problem, my witcher friend.', Evgeni added, smiling. 'And thus far...It's going as planned.'

'Glad to hear it.'

'Hah ! I bet you are.', he replied, slapping Gerd's shoulder. Then set his eyes ahead, more exactly toward the individuals that sat at the table. 'Look at that prick. Since I've asked how do those two feel compared with the whores in this hole, he keeps avoiding me as if I have the fuckin' plague. Hence why he left your side so nimbly, as soon as he saw me walk this way.', Evgeni continued nodding towards Vasyl Shaltz. 'He better not do the same when I bid for his next bloody painting...'. He emptied his tankard then nudged Gerd. 'Come on, it's high time we go upstairs.'

'We ?', replied Gerd.

'That's right.'

'You are in this charade as well ?'.

The red bearded noble nodded. 'Shall we ?'.

'Of course.', answered Gerd, emptying his pint of mead.

Once upstairs they took a left towards one of the rooms and knocked three times, then entered. Inside were Francess, two of the men he sat at the table with, Clair Siggmariggen and the bartender, who opened the door. They were all scattered across the room.

'You should've come one at a time...', said Francess.

Evgeni clicked his tongue. 'You nilfgaardians, always despair over such little details...'

'Those details are essential. Can't you do something the way you were told to ?'.

'No. For I'm not your bloody soldier...', the noble replied, nodding towards the bartender.

'You incompetent-'.

'Enough you two.', interrupted Claire. 'I've grown tired of hearing you two dispute alike children. Now that we're all here, how about we explain Gerd what all this is about...'

'Right.', replied Evgeni, walking towards a chair next to a window on the other side of the room.

'Thank you, Claire.', said Francess, taking a few steps back, leaning against the table.

Claire made a couple of steps toward Gerd, taking a deep breath as she looked at the others, then began. 'A mere two days ago, in the city of Novigrad two atrocious crimes have been reported. The victims had been both of high born origins, as well as revered personalities within the high society of Novigrad. Both corpses had been found in their respective homes.'

However, both had suffered different injuries, and are suspected to have died in different ways. It is still unknown if these injuries had been inflicted while alive or post-mortem.'

'Alright. So what do you want me to do, exactly ? Determine the causes of death ? If their injuries had been post-mortem or not ?', asked Gerd, glancing over the nobles present in the room.

'All of those above, and the one who did it, obviously.', added the noble left of Francess. Fair haired, a bit more corpulent than the other, dressed in a elegant doublet, black with certain red ornamentations, sitting on a chair at the table. 'I apologize. We haven't been properly introduced. I am Silas de Qudauvain, and the gentleman, on the right side of the table is-'

'Newt Tenzs.', replied the noble right of Francess. A tall yet slim individual, dressed in a simple doublet, all black.

'I already am working a contract for-'

'We know.', Francess intervened. 'However, we didn't know how much could we refrain ourselves from asking you to take a look into those gruesome murders.'

'Gruesome ?'.

'Indeed. By the early corner reports, the first victim Alphonso Veldi, forty-three, died around three days ago, late in the afternoon. While the other, Patricia La Valette, thirty-one, died two days ago, in the evening. Even so, we would want you to take another look at the bodies.', continued Francess.

'Do you know any details regarding the state of the bodies ?'.

'We weren't allowed in, for the families restricted access to anyone else but family members and close friends.', answered Silas. 'Yet, we managed to get some, information-'

'More of, I got you that information...', added Newt, he cleared his throat and then continued. 'Ahem. Which makes this whole thing sound more like a jest.'

'Meaning ?'.

'Well, master witcher. The individual who gave this information, mentioned being present at the time the bodies had been firstly discovered within the two households. Ahem. According to the information received, Alphonso Veldi's body was stuffed with hay alike an animal, showcased upon the table within the dining hall, with organs and blood of animal origin scattered around him. While his insides had been found later, stuffed in the torso of his favorite Temerian steed, located in the stables. As for Lady La Valette, her corpse had been found in her bedroom, kneeling, impaled on a wooden pole. Ahem, through her genitalia and protruding out of her mouth. Also, her arms have been removed and placed on the floor, in the shape of a circle around her body, in which a pentagram was drawn in blood.'

'Any connection between the two ?'.

'Besides them both being nobility, nothing much...', answered Francess. 'Both had an affair with each other a couple of years ago, but-'.

'Might be why Patricia La Valette was impaled in such a way...', interrupted Gerd. 'Was she married ?'.

'No.', replied Claire.

'Hence the pole. She must've had other such 'affairs'...'.
'Gerd.', resumed Claire. 'Another reason we brought you here, is that Patricia and Alphonso were partners of ours.'.

'Thus, you all might be possible targets...'.
'Exactly.', added Evgeni.

'Well, Lady Claire, I cannot work two contracts as complex as these, at the same time.'.

'We understand.', she replied.

'Yet, we can't assume this isn't urgent.', added Newt. 'Either one of us could be next...So, I say you postpone the one that has proven by now to be unfruitful, and an obvious waste of your time, which might I add, is regarding an already dead man. And, focus all your attention on the one with-'.

'You kaedweni-shit ! How dare you speak that way about her husband-', Evgeni burst, raising from his chair and bolting toward Newt before being stopped by Francess and Silas. 'Say it one more time and I'll fuckin' kill you myself-'.

'Evgeni, calm down. I don't need you to defend my husband.', said Claire approaching.
'True, that man hasn't ever been able to even defend himself...', Newt scoffed.

Evgeni turned red with fury, pushing Silas and Francess aside with ease, launching himself toward the other side of the table, where he punched Newt off the chair, before being restrained by the two once again.

'You selfish prick ! You think we are not afraid ?!'.
'Gerd.', said Francess, while the witcher used his Axii sign on Evgeni, who grew so calm he fell on his bottom. 'Thank you.'.

Claire approached Newt and extended her right hand to help him stand. 'Are you all right ?', she asked before he slapped her hand aside and stood up by himself.

'I'm fine.', he replied holding his left hand to his left cheek. 'Learn how to control your lover, Siggmariggen.'.

'Gerd.', said Francess, while the witcher used his Axii sign on Evgeni, who grew so calm he fell on his bottom. 'Thank you.'.

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'I'm fine.', he replied holding his left hand to his left cheek. 'Learn how to control your lover, Siggmariggen.'.

Gerd noticed Claire's right hand clutch into a fist, then softly back, as she calmed herself down. 'I apologize for his behavior. He's drunk. Besides you did this to yourself...'

'I guess I did.', replied Newt.

'We are all stressed as we are, let's not create more of it, by fighting amongst each other. All right ?'.

Newt took Claire's right hand into his as he noticed the back of her hand has turned red. 'I am sorry, I-'.

'It's nothing. Water under the bridge.', she replied, taking her hand away. 'I guess we're done for today. Silas. Newt. You can go downstairs and enjoy what's left of the party, while the rest of us take care of the remaining business at hand. And thank you for attending.'.

Then both noble-men nodded their heads and proceeded toward the door and left the room, while Gerd helped Francess place Evgeni in a chair.

'I'm sorry you had to witness that.', said Claire, turning toward Gerd, while Francess walked and stopped to her left. 'Now, Francess tells me you've obtained yet another name...'

'I did. Arlow.'.

'Well, this being the other business at hand.', began Francess. 'The name is of a mercenary, operating around Novigrad. Apparently, Arlow, has a few men hold up in the ruins of a castle south of Novigrad.'.

'Is Arlow going to be there as well ?'.

'I cannot say for sure.'.

'Is that all you know ?'.

'Of use, yes.'.

'What of those I can't use ?'.

'Rumors.'.

'And...', murmured Gerd, expecting Francess to share those rumors.

'I can say, that if you find Arlow, you'll probably, be able to get the employer's name.'.

'Can you be sure of it ?'.

'It's a rumor for a reason...'

'Tremendous...', Gerd replied, unsatisfied with Francess's lead.

'Look, I can't find much on this name, but rumors and useless tales. At least you have a location.'.

'Right. I'll try to shake this tree as well, and see what falls.'

'Good.'

'I better get going then. So long.'

'Good luck.', continued Francess.

Gerd then left the room and headed to the stairs, before being stopped by Claire's pull on his sword, who followed him out of the room. 'Gerd.'

'What is it?', he replied turning.

'Listen here.', she said approaching. 'If you find the name of the employer, do not attempt to enter the city. Go at the Seven Cats Inn, and ask the innkeeper about his daughter's emerald ruby. He'll give you a paper and ink, write the name on the paper, and give it back to him. He'll send someone to deliver it. Then get as far as you can from the city, for a fortnight at the least. Do you understand?'

'I do.'

'All right. Take care.', she said, watching as Gerd reached the balustrade near the staircase and walked downstairs.

The ruins used as a temporary home by the mercenaries, were located south of Novigrad, somewhere along the coast of The Great Sea. Finding it wasn't going to be a challenge at all, as the only ruins near the coast, south of Novigrad, were of a castle and once the homestead to a forgotten noble family, that owned the structure and a significant patch of land, around two centuries ago. The western side of the castle began to be flooded by the sea water a couple of decades back, and by the looks of it, the whole structure that's left might be washed away by the sea in the near future.

Nowadays rumored to be the home of drowners, water hags and recently, Arlow's gang of mercenaries.

The whole structure was laying bare beneath the night's sky, shined by a couple of torches the mercenaries have placed around, and the moonlight. Gerd approached the ruins from northeast, crouching among bushes as he carefully watched the ruins. From where he noticed lights atop of one of the eastern towers, and the lower levels of the other, and counted or assumed that the number of mercenaries present in the camp was around ten or twelve. All that remained was to plan his approach...

Therefore, he then advanced toward the ruins, staying low, among the shrubbery, sure that he'll remain unnoticed by the two archers at the top of the tower. Or so he thought, as from ahead an archer appeared from beyond a few boulders near the road. With his bow high and pointed towards the witcher, as he approached, slowly.

'What are you doing around these parts, friend ?', the archer said, later revealed by the moonlight to be an elf.

Gerd raised slowly, as the elf approached. 'Lookin' for berries...', he replied, now standing straight.

The elf responded with a subtle smile on his left side of the mouth. 'Knock him...!'

Gerd heard a swift stroke of the bushes behind, then all went to black, as he was knocked in the noggin with the pommel of a sword. What followed was the sound of him being dragged on the road leading to the ruins, succeeded by several voices and a thud as he was thrown in a cage and the screeching of the metal door as it was closed, then the clink of it being locked.

'What did you two bring ?', asked a mercenary approaching the elf.

'A witcher. Apparently, he was looking for berries...', replied the elf, laughing, as he passed the key to Gerd's cage to the man that asked.

'What 'bout the boss ?', the mercenary asked the elf as both walked away.

'Won't be back till' tomorrow at dusk...', the elf responded, his voice growing inaudible as his slim figure disappeared beyond the blinding light of the torches and candles laid around the castle's courtyard.

The following morning, he woke up with a bad headache, almost naked if not for his trousers and his hands tied, as he sat on his bottom, with his back leaned against the cold bars of the cage. At the sight of a dark haired woman, wearing a beige shirt and black trousers, staring at him.

'You witches don't look that different from normal folk...', she said, coming closer to the cage. 'Sides your cat-eyes I mean...', she replied with a squint of her green eyes while crouching near the cage, placing her left hand around the bars of the door. 'Maybe you make the difference down there...', she continued, pointing at Gerd's crotch. She sighed, moving her right hand between her breasts, taking them both out of her shirt. 'Do you like 'em ?'. she asked, playing with her left nipple. Then continued downwards towards her privates, pressing her middle finger above the trousers, in a counter-clockwise fashion. 'Hmm, only if you weren't in that cage...'. She then moved her right hand to her mouth, biting on her index and middle finger, starting to suck on them and after, with a dripping line of saliva, she closed her eyes as she moved her right hand beneath her trousers, and continued with a soft moan. 'All the things I would let you do to me...', she resumed, placing her head between the bars of the cage's door.

'What the fuck !? Gala !', shouted one of the mercenaries coming out of the northeastern tower.

'What ?!', she replied standing up.

'What are you doing ?'.

'Was. I was doing something, that's none of your fuckin' business ! Now, fuck off before I cut you !'.

'Alright-', the man responded, walking away.

'I said fuck off !', she shouted, grabbing the hilt of the knife she had strapped on her right thigh, as the man quickened his steps.

'Gala.', an elf woman called from the southern side of the courtyard, approaching. 'Gear up, you're coming with me to Mulbrydale to get supplies.'.

'Right.', she replied as she covered her naked breasts beneath her shirt. 'Later, witcher...'.

After that, not much happened till' after dusk, when a couple of riders entered the ruins from south, and following them the elf woman and Gala returned from Mulbrydale with a cart of supplies. Among the first group to return, Gerd believed that one of them must be Arlow. He didn't see anything but their shapes as the area where they entered was dark, and his sight was affected by all the torch light in the courtyard.

During the night Gerd was awoken by the sounds of muffled screams and cries, accompanied by the laughs and voices of several men, coming from the base of the northeastern tower. Not long after, he saw two men drag a little girl's body from the tower back to a cage beyond a wall two meters from Gerd's cage.

It took him sometime to fall back asleep, due to a bad headache and an itch on his lower back he couldn't properly scratch, as his hands were tied. Yet, luckily, the mercenaries had the sense to leave him his trousers...

At the break of daylight Gerd woke up to the sound of waves and the couple of knocks as a mercenary dragged a lit torch along the bars of his cage. 'Wake up, witcher ! You have visitors...', the mercenary spoke with a smirk.

'How's your head ?', asked the she-elf. 'Still spinning ? Must've ate some bad berries.', she continued laughing as the archer joined her.

'Which one of you is Arlow ?', Gerd asked standing up.

The archer chuckled. 'None.'.

He then fixated his eyes on a short bearded man he saw last night, matching the description given by Reginald. 'Is that how you treat little girls ?'.

'What ?', asked the mercenary approaching. 'Do say that again ?', he provoked.

'You like little girls ? What ? Grown women laugh at the sight of your little prick ?'.

The ginger mercenary awkwardly laughed, while unsheathing his hunting knife.

'Calm down, Broli.', said the she-elf, stopping the mercenary by stepping in front of him. 'And I recall telling you to not touch her ever again, didn't I ?'.

'Lela...', Broli mumbled.

'What did I say I would do to you if you happened to do it again ?'.

'You don't actually believe him, do you ?', began the mercenary hesitant. 'He-He wants us to fight each other, so he can get out of that cage-'.

'Oy ! What's all this fuss about ?!', asked a tall and bulky frame of a woman, that if not for her voice, Gerd would've mistaken her for a man. As she walked out from the entrance of the southern tower, with Gala following behind her.

'Nothing.', responded Broli.

'It didn't sound like nothing...', she added approaching. 'Lela ?'.

The mercenary looked at the elf woman, Lela, subtly nudging his head.

'Broli touched the girl, again...'.

Broli quickly turned toward the woman that stopped behind him. 'I didn't the-the witcher is lying...'.

'Is he ?', asked the woman, looking at Gerd.

'He is-', Broli said, then stopped as the woman grabbed him by the neck.

'You see, I don't think he does...', she replied, then looked at the elf. 'Eaedyn. Take him with you to Heatherton.'.

'Gladly.', the elf replied, as the woman let go of Broli's neck. 'Go ready your horse...', the elf continued, as Broli quickly walked to the southern side of the courtyard.

All the while the short duration of that distraction, Gerd managed to use Axii on one of the cutthroats standing near the cage, that happened to have the keys necessary to unlock the door. An action the others didn't notice until the clank made by the door as it was being unlocked. Unfortunately, by then it was too late. As the witcher casted the Aard spell and blew most of them away, while the one that unlocked the cage was struck in the head by the door as it flew out of it's rusty hinges, cracking the man's head. Gerd approached the bandit's corpse, taking the sword, and with a lunge and half a turn he slashed Eaedyn's neck and stabbed the mercenary next to him. While the elf woman quickly shot two arrows, that Gerd stopped by using the corpse of the mercenary he previously stabbed as a shield. From who's back he picked a knife, then rolled beyond a wall to the right, from where he advanced along the wall towards the southern side of the courtyard, where, sitting on the top of a barrel, he found a loaded crossbow. He appeared from beyond the western wall and shot an arrow beneath Lela's left breast as he then took on the other mercenaries in the courtyard.

The elf woman fell on her right knee, coughing, as she watched the witcher kill the others, while the woman that had entered the courtyard previously, was heading for the entrance of the southern tower.

After he finished the other bandits, he advanced towards the tower, while from beyond the south wall, Broli appeared charging. He waved his sword diagonally, which Gerd stopped at the same time while allowing it to slide down his blade, that as soon as the mercenary's sword slid off the tip, he turned into a diagonal slash across Broli's torso, followed by a stab.

'Fuckin' witch-', spoke Broli before falling down.

Then Gerd proceeded toward the entrance of the southern tower. 'Arlow !', he shouted, entering the tower.

As he advanced towards the staircase that let to the top of the tower, from the left, Gala lounged while holding her dagger. Gerd dodged right and rotated his blade, cutting her right arm off from beneath the elbow, following with a stab through the stomach. She slid her fingers along Gerd's shoulder as he took the blade out of her abdomen, and fell on her side watching the witcher walk up the stairs.

'Arlow !', he shouted once again, before reaching the top of the tower.

'What !', Arlow yelled, as Gerd reached the last two steps of the staircase leading to the top floor of the southern tower. She waved her sword horizontally, right into the side of the pillar that sustained a part of the wooden wall next to the stairs. Forcing Gerd to duck, then roll forward all the while she removed the blade from the pillar's side. 'I'm going to crush you...', she continued grabbing her sword with both hands. As she then charged towards Gerd, who raised his sword to stop hers, but, saw it brake in two, the instance it made contact with Arlow's blade. Almost, helplessly watching as the mercenary's sword tip passed by his left eye at the distance of a grass hair. And if he hadn't lean his upper body backwards as quick as he did, he would've been beheaded, clean. He then moved to her right as she attempted a horizontal slash again, that Gerd avoided by ducking, but was then punched in the face by Arlow. 'Not bad...', she replied laughing.

She punched him hard enough, that even for his size he had to turn his back to her in order to not fall off his feet. And as he rotated back to her, he extended his left hand and casted Aard.

The spell had been of such intensity that it blew her away into the wall. Luckily for Gerd, her right hand slammed against the window's side and made her loose her grip on the handle, allowing the sword to slip and fall out the window...

'That's cheating !', Arlow yelled, after she watched her blade hit the side and then fall out the window. She quickly got up and charged toward Gerd, grunting as she speared into him, moving her hands behind his legs and slamming him on the floor. He managed to hit her in the jaw with his right hand, before she did the same to him, as she managed two more punches before Gerd placed his right hand on her left breast and used Aard again. This time blowing her into the ceiling of the tower from where she bounced back on the floor, crashing through a table on the other side of the window her sword flew out of.

Gerd quickly got up and kicked her in the head, knocking her out. As he then found some rope and chains, and tied her to the wooden beam that held the ceiling and the roof of the tower. Then as he searched through the chamber, he found his gear in a chest on the other side of the room.

Through the many years, Gerd fought and killed many monsters, humans, non-humans and even, rarely, witchers...

In the early years he spent on the path, he used to stay his blade if the situations allowed for such restraint to be applied...

However, as he grew older, he found that such restraints, could cause certain complications that he won't benefit from. Thus he came up with a sentence to justify his violence and lack of mercy, as well as all the corpses he left on his trail.

'Honor and respect, are for knights, heroes and fools. Not witchers...'

'Wake up.', Gerd said, slapping Arlow's left cheek.

She did so, struggling to break the rope and chains. 'Once I break free of these ties I will crack your head like a melon...With my bare hands !'.

'Alright...', replied Gerd, sitting on a barrel. 'Until then, do you mind telling me...Who hired you to get the basilisk venom ?'.

'I won't tell anything, to a cheater !', she yelled as she struggled again to break the rope and chains holding her to the wooden beam.

He then casted the sign of Axii. 'Tell me the name of the one who hired you to get the basilisk venom ?'.

'Egil Yngvarrkir.', Arlow spoke.

'Do you have any letter or-'.

'In the cabinet next to the stairs, second drawer...'.

Gerd checked the drawer and found a letter, signed by the underworld boss's right hand, Wagner von Grousse.

'The boss appreciates your quick resolve, and will forward your payment in a couple of days...It will arrive from the east.', mumbled Gerd, as he read the letter. The contents of the letter implied that Arlow and her gang, worked a couple of other jobs for Egil. Which seemed to extend to a couple of months before they were even hired to acquire the poison. 'Alright. Thanks...', he continued looking at Arlow.

He then went back to the barrel, and tipped it over, letting the contents drip over the floor around Arlow, and headed towards the stairs as she began to fret.

'No, no, no ! You coward ! Cheater !'.

'Why are you screaming ? I didn't even set it aflame yet...', he replied casting Igni. 'I'd suggest that instead of screaming, you better start praying to the Eternal Fire...', he continued, then

walked downstairs as the mercenary kept screaming and struggle to break free, while the fire intensified.

When he reached the bottom of the tower and exited it, stepping into the courtyard filled with corpses, he saw next to the cage he spent most of his time among those ruins, the elf woman, Lela. With the little girl he saw during the night, sitting in her lap, holding onto her right hand, covered in blood. She was gasping for breaths, yet, as she watched the little girl playing with her golden locks of hair, she smiled. Keeping her closing eyes fixated onto her little face, and her hand on the little girl's right cheek, wiping her tears.

'You'll have to leave...'. Lela whispered, moving a couple of red hair locks aside from the little girl's left cheek, gazing into her blue eyes.

'But...', she began sniffing. 'I don't want to...'.

'I'll be fine.', Lela continued, as the tear that she held onto for some time, finally dropped from her eye and slid down her right cheek. 'He'll take you back to your father...'.

Then, Lela slowly turned her head, as she heard footsteps from her left, locking her blue eyes on Gerd, as he was approaching. Then looked beyond him, at the top of the tower now completely engulfed in flames.

'Witcher-', Lela whispered, then coughed blood. 'Take her with you-'.

'I won't leave you...', the little girl said, sniffing.

'Elia, we talked about this. You can't stay here.', said Lela, crying as well. 'Witcher. Please. Take her with you. Take her to her- father in Erde-', she continued, then coughed blood on Elia's rugged shirt. 'Please...'.

Gerd looked at Lela and Elia, as the fire crackled and covered the sound of the waves of the sea, even his thoughts. It's roaring being the only thing he could hear...

'Please...She's innocent- She has no fault in all of this...She won't survive all alone-', she resumed, raising her voice.

Gerd slowly leaned towards Lela, who extended Elia's hand toward him. 'Please-'.

'Alright.', he said taking Elia's right hand into his, then as she raised from her lap, he looked in Lela's auburn eyes for a while.

Lela gulped some air, then, nodded as she swallowed some blood. 'Go !', she said as Gerd took Elia in his arms and walked out of the ruins. She cried, looking over Gerd's shoulder at Lela, who smiled and waved to little Elia...

Gerd and Elia went north, toward the lighthouse, sitting atop the cliffs southwest of Novigrad, where he left his mare. On the way there Elia didn't talk, as she just looked at the castle's ruins, sniffing from time to time...

'Master witcher !', greeted the lighthouse keeper, seeing them approach.

'Fritjof.', replied Gerd, now near the islander.

'I thought something happened to you, master...!', said Fritjof. 'Where did you find her ?', the old man asked, looking at Elia. 'She an orphan ?'.

'Yes.', replied Gerd. As Elia left his side going to his mare, who lowered her head, letting Elia touch her muzzle, then snorted, making Elia laugh. 'Thanks for taking care of Yyn.', he continued, taking out of his pouch twenty crowns, and handing them to Fritjof.

'Thank you.', replied the old man, smiling.

'Come on, Elia.', he said extending his right hand, that she was hesitant to take at first, but did after a few moments. Gerd placed her on Yyn's saddle, and then climbed on, behind her. 'Farewell, Fritjof.', he said before leaving.

'Good luck on the path !', replied the old man and watched as he rode off.

He was heading towards the Seven Cats Inn, where he had to leave the letter he found in Arlow's tower. And the name, Egil Yngvarrkir...

They quickly reached the bridge beyond which stood the Inn itself. Gerd left Yyn at the watering spot in front of the inn, and with Elia next to him, entered the inn, and approached the innkeeper.

'Good day.', he said as the innkeeper approached.

'Need rooms ?'.

'No. I'm here about a contract regarding your daughter's emerald ruby...!'.

The innkeeper opened his eyes wide, and then responded. 'Right away. Please sit, at the table near the corner.'.

Gerd did as the innkeeper said and sat at the instructed table. 'Elia. Are you hungry ?', he asked, while Elia nudged her head in negation.

Shortly the innkeeper came at the table, and sat on the other side. Then placed in front of Gerd a sheet of paper, a pen, and ink. 'Here...!'.

Gerd wrote the name on the sheet of paper, and then handed him the letter as well.

'Is this all ?', asked the innkeeper.

'Yes.'.

'I'll send someone right away.', the innkeeper replied, then left the table.

'Are you sure you're not hungry ?', Gerd asked again, while Elia replied by nodding her head. 'Alright. Come on...'

Then both left the Inn riding on Yyn's back, heading northeast, towards Erde...

On their way there, Gerd thought of what to do. In who's care, should he give Elia to ? For her father, Reginald, is dead, probably her mother too. Should he ask the cobbler, Ella, if she could take her in ? He didn't know what to do. Nothing seemed to be right. For he just didn't know what to do...

He didn't even want to know of how many times did the men in those ruins abused her, like they did that night...He knew he killed them all, yet that won't help her forget, or heal from whatever those men damaged...

He saw many young boys die during the Trial of the Grasses, but compared to this, to Elia, he didn't care for those boys at all. For that wasn't a result of his own doing. For all those boys didn't die because of him, they were not in that situation because of his choices...

While this little girl in front of him, Elia. The forces that placed her in his path, were not mysterious, or unknown in any way, shape or form. No, it was all his doing. His actions.

His fault...

Thus, when he saw the figure of Erde appear from beyond the trees alongside the road, late in the afternoon, he didn't know what to do...

So, instead of entering the village, he stopped near the road. Got off the saddle, and led Yyn by the reins, with Elia in the saddle inside the camp near the village, towards Kaela's tent...

With each one of his steps on the soft grass and dirt, he felt as if he walked on a hollow shell and with each individual step, he deepened into nothingness...

'Gerd.', said Kairr coming out of the tent, as the witcher approached. 'Welcome back !', he continued. 'Who are you ?', he asked quickly walking to Yyn's left side, looking at Elia. 'Good day, my lady. May I ask for your fair name, perchance ?'.

She smiled then replied. 'Elia.'.

'What a lovely name !', he responded. 'Are you a princess ?'.

She chuckled. 'No...'

'Are you sure ?'.

'I am.'.

'Well, I, my fair lady, do not believe you.'.

From beyond the tent, holding an empty basket, Kaela appeared. She smiled as she saw him, then approached.

'Sister, look what Gerd brought.', Kairr said taking Elia from the saddle. 'This is my sister, Kaela.', he continued putting her down near her. 'Kaela this is Elia...', he resumed placing his hands on his belt.

'Elia...That's a beautiful name.', Kaela said sliding her fingers around Elia's right cheek, then looked at Gerd. 'What of her pare-', she suddenly paused, for she found her answer through the witcher's lines of thought. As she took a deep trembling breath, then hurried towards Gerd, wrapping her arms around his neck, while he leaned his head on her naked right shoulder and placed his right hand on her hip. While Kairr took Elia in his arms, as both looked at the two...

The Path: .I. Worth of Iron

Those are a few tales and short stories, set during the first couple of years, Gerd, as a young witcher, experienced while practicing his trade on the path.

.XXVII. The Path: .I. Worth of Iron.

The ship he boarded in the harbor of Kaer Trolde on Ard Skellig a mere four days ago, left him a couple of miles away from the southern shores of the Pontar, in the land of the Lilies, in Temeria. He and his mare, ventured further southwest, where they passed by the city of Cidaris, from where due to the barren notice boards, he continued south in search for work. Which came a day later, in a village northeast of Kerack, regarding a couple of drowners. And once the drowners were dealt with and the reward collected, from there he advanced east, along the northern shore of the Adalatte, flowing through the valley that bears the same name and the northern woods of Brokilon, rising in the Owl Hills. He and his mare Yyn, stopped in the town of Dorian, sitting a couple hundred miles west, from the Temerian capital, Vizima.

Where as he perused over the notice board, mostly occupied with requests such as: *'Help needed at the post office.'*, *'Bard wanted to perform at the Weary Inn...'*, *'Requirement of extra supplies of weapons, armor and helmets needed. The local armorers and blacksmiths willing to take the orders, are instructed to present themselves at the guard post...'*, *'Wild dogs roaming the woods southeast of Dorian. Hunter needed...'*. Thus after a hefty amount of time he spent reading most of them, his eyes fell upon a witcher contract, regarding a cockatrice, that was mentioned in the notice to have a nest in the hills south of the town...

'Witcher !', shouted a man that got out of the Inn in front of which was the notice board. 'Are you considering on taking that contract ?', the man asked, seeing that the witcher took the sheet of paper from the board, nimbly approaching.

The witcher glanced over the sheet of paper, then looked at the man. 'Are you- Beaumont J. Yaalvond du Vengerberg ?', he asked, being sure of the man's answer. As he was dressed in a clean and elegant gambeson, trousers and boots, with a satchel dangling near his left hip, and a knife on his belt.

'I am, yes. Please, call me Beau. However, are you going to take that contract ?', he asked, excited to hear the witcher's response.

'I am.', answered the witcher.

'Tremendous !', shouted the man. 'Let's talk reward and details regarding the contract inside the Inn, please.', continued the man, as the witcher joined him inside.

They walked inside the Inn and as they were heading towards a table near a window looking out towards the board, a woman addressed Beau.

'I see someone had taken that contract of yours.', the woman said entering the Inn after them. 'Is that him?', she asked nodding toward the witcher. She was dressed in a elegant yellow and black jacket and beneath it she wore a shirt with a low cut top that revealed most of her cleavage, black tights and boots with short heels. Had her blond hair cut short, and a subtle scar running from her left earlobe down her cheek and stopped near her lower lip.

'Indeed.', replied the employer. 'Where were you? I remember telling you to stay close...'

'I was investigating.'

'And?'

'Nothing. If he and his brother committed fraud, they covered their tracks well thus far...'

'They did commit fraud!', he insisted. 'Otherwise, there wouldn't be all those discrepancies in their books!'

'I understand, but this far we have no proof of it.', she added sitting at the table, followed by Beau, and the witcher that sat on the other side of the table.

The man sighed then looked at the witcher. 'Anyway, witcher...How much do you want for the contract?'

'Don't ask him that you idiot!', she intervened, nudging his shoulder, then looked at the witcher. 'He'll give you twenty-seven orens.'

'That's too low-', Beau mumbled, before being nudged again.

'Take it or leave it...', she continued staring at the witcher.

'I can't agree nor decline your offer, due to the lack of information regarding the draconid.', the witcher replied, leaning towards the table. 'Why don't you tell me more about it first? Then, we can settle on the price.'

'What's there to know? You have to kill it not us...'

'Edda.', said Beau, leaning his head right, towards her. 'Let me talk.'

'Fine.', she replied, crossing her arms.

'Well...Ahem. As mentioned in the notice, she, has a nest south from here in the Owl Hills. I also suspect she could be feeding her fresh hatched chicks. As, a mere few days ago, she attacked a couple of folk traveling the road to Maribor.'

'Is that all?', the witcher asked after a few moments, while the man nodded. 'Alright then...Fifty orens.'

'What!?', Edda burst, hitting the table. 'Thirty!'

'Edda...', he began. 'Allow me.', Beau said, then looked back at the witcher. 'Let's shake on it.', he continued extending his right hand over the table.

'You idiot...', Edda mumbled shifting her gaze to her right, looking out the window.

'Now let's talk further details...', Beau added, while Gerd pricked his ears, taking his eyes off Edda, back to her companion. 'Edda and I want to accompany you to the nest-'.

'I'd rather go alone.', the witcher replied.

'I understand, but we won't interfere with your work. We'll watch from afar, and once the beast is put down, we'll approach.'.

'Why ?', asked Gerd, placing his forearms on the table.

'Does it matter ?', Edda replied, setting her cold gaze upon the witcher. 'We pay you to kill it. What does it matter to you, what we do or want after all ? It's none of your business.', she continued, then elegantly reverted her head right, and with a squint of her eyes she continued to look out the window.

The sunlight that fell through the small window, to her right, settled mostly on her face and chest. Highlighting her small breasts and smooth skin, that due to the warmth in the last couple of days, took a reddish nuance. Her long neck, jawline, small thin nose, delicate cheekbones and rosy lips, while her blueish almost grey eyes glittered alike a cold fresh mountain spring.

It would be quite an understatement saying that Gerd, fancied her. His eyes glued to her the moment she entered the inn and addressed Beau. And couldn't maintain his attention away from her figure since they sat at the table.

'So be it.', Gerd replied. 'Should we leave for the nest, then ?'.

'Of course.', Beau responded, raising from the bench. 'Are there certain preparations you have to make ?'.

'No.'.

'Then let's go.', added Beau, as both he and Edda raised and stood near the side of the table. Then closely followed by the witcher they got out of the inn, and headed on foot down the road, south, where among the hills was the cockatrice and her nest. After a couple of minutes they spent on the road to the location of the nest, they took a right off the main road, between the scarce woods that covered the base of the hill, which they soon began to ascend.

'The nest is very easy to spot from this side of the hill.', Beau added, gasping. 'I've been- watching her for a couple of days now, and through these days I've come to the conclusion that her chicks must've hatched at least three days ago. Thus why she- enlarged her hunting area. It must be due to the- sparse wildlife in those hills. I recall reading about the fauna found in these hills, and that it was the most affected- in the last three centuries, mostly by human activity. So- I'd say that, if, this particular cockatrice took some human lives, it is an

unfortunate incident, which- happens to be mostly something of our own doing. Don't- you agree ?'.

'Maybe I do. But, who else accompanied you here ?', asked Gerd, carefully scanning the ground.

'Just Edda, once. Why ?'.

'There are many tracks leading uphill. Some as fresh as this morning.'.

'Well isn't that weird...', he said turning to Edda. 'I haven't been here, since yesterday at noon.'.

'Someone has. There are four sets of tracks leading to the northwestern side of the hill.'.

'That's where the nest is.', added Beau.

'I'll follow the tracks, you two-'.

'We'll watch from afar, we know...', interrupted Edda.

'Good.'.

'What if the cockatrice isn't there ?'. asked Beau.

'I'll place a bait, and wait for her to show up.'.

'Good luck then.', replied Beau, as Edda went a couple of steps ahead to the eastern side of the hill.

'Are you comin' ?', she asked turning.

'I am.', Beau answered, going after her. 'We'll see you once you slayed the beast.'.

The witcher replied with a nod, then turned and focused on the fresh tracks leading to the other side of the hill. As he advanced up the hill, among the fresh sets of tracks, he noticed some old sets as well. Not really knowing what to make of them, he continued uphill, where the sets of tracks fresh and old, began to explain themselves. As next to the nest, were two bodies with their hands and legs tied. Males, naked and had been dead by about five to eight hours. Untouched by the chicks who were too small to reach them. They were meant for their mother.

Gerd glanced at the chicks, who were still too small and powerless to get out of the nest, situated beneath the shade of a couple of trees, within what seemed to be a cellar, probably, once used as a stash point. He didn't have to ask or wonder about who were those that used it as a stash, for the bodies that were placed next to it explained it rather well. Simply put, Gerd believed it to be tied with the underworld in Dorian.

'Using the cockatrice as a way to dispose of bodies...', Gerd murmured, crouched near the bodies. 'Those two had their windpipe severed...', he continued inspecting the corpses, then

stood up. 'Their stench should do the trick. She should show up soon.'

Then he looked inside the nest, to see if he could find remains of other human frames. 'Nothing.', he murmured, while the chicks were shrieking. 'Should burn the nest.', he continued, then casted *Igni* on a fluff of dried grass and threw it in the nest. 'This should also catch her attention...'

And so it did, as soon as her chicks began to cry, Gerd heard from north a loud shriek followed by a rustle of the trees. And soon the cockatrice's figure appeared from beyond the northern tree tops, then dived towards the witcher, which stood ready with both hands on his silver sword. The cockatrice attempted to grab the witcher with her talons before landing, but Gerd rolled back and casted the sign of *Aard*, then charged toward the beast, managing a diagonal slash across her chest, then tried another, but had to move back and roll as the cockatrice swung her tail. Gerd then moved in a semi-circle, pushing the beast to move left, while popping the cork of his Petri's *Philter* potion, gulping down the contents. Then with a grunt casted the sign of *Aard* right before she attempted a beak lunge, that blew the cockatrice inside the burning cellar. Afterwards he grabbed his sword with both hand and as soon as the cockatrice's head popped out from the cellar he struck with all his strength the middle of her neck, cutting clean through it.

The head of the cockatrice flew off to the left side of the cellar while the rest of her body fell back into the burning cellar. And not long after Edda and Beau appeared from the eastern side of the hill.

'You've killed it !', said Beau satisfied. Then turned to Edda as soon as he saw the two corpses. 'And look what we have here...', he continued, pushing one of the corpses with his foot. 'Armin and Svarn. I told you to never doubt my instinct, didn't I ?'.

'You got lucky...'

'This, has nothing to do with luck, my dear.'

While the two talked over the corpses of the two bandits, Gerd collected the head, and then approached Edda and Beau.

'My work is done.', the witcher said, standing near the head of Svarn's corpse.

'Indeed it is.', Beau replied. 'Here is the sum of orens we've agreed upon. And...An extra of twenty orens, for the cockatrice head.'

'What do we need the head for ?', asked Edda.

'I've got something particular in mind regarding it...', Beau answered, handing the witcher a pouch of coins.

'Well thanks. So long.', the witcher said, then left towards the slope of the hill.

'Where to ?', asked Beau.

'South.'

'Good luck on the path, then. I hope we meet again !'.

'Farewell.', he replied without turning, as he walked down the hill.

He got back in Dorian, where he bought some food, and other necessary supplies. Then later, around noon he and his mare Yyn left the town of Dorian, heading south on the main road, towards the lands of Sodden.

In the early days of the first weeks of spring, beyond the hills and plains filled with flowers and grass with vibrant shades of green. Past many valleys and hills, upon which were laid cities, towns and fortresses, stood a great and rich mountainous formation. And amongst all the peaks stood highest and mighty of them all, alike a fang that pierced and cut through the clouds, the Mount Carbon.

Later in the evening, among the woods within the south-eastern valleys and hills of the Mahakam mountains. Amidst the trees not far from the road, near a crackling fire, a couple of rough laughs and shouts resonated through the dark woods...

'What's that crap you're sayin' ? We've been supplying their bloody wars and campaigns with high quality iron and steel for centuries ! I say we can take a fuckin' break once in a while...!'

'Sides' we're only a couple of months shy of the Ale Festival.', continued another, sitting closest to the fire. 'After all, this shipment of iron is due to arrive tomorrow at noon. Thus, there ain't no reason to fret...!'

'We get the same amount of ore whether we deliver it on time or early.', spoke another, sitting to the left of the one that spoke earlier, on a log, while the other two nodded their heads. 'The Temerians need their precious iron to kick those Lyrian and Rivian bastards back into their mothers wombs...!'

From the woods, left of the dwarves sitting near the fire, a tall, clean shaven, auburn short haired individual approached. Dressed in a rugged, washed up green tunic, above which dangled by his neck, a medallion shaped alike the head of a bear. As lower, trousers of the same color as the tunic, yet unlike the rest of his outfit, he wore a new pair of boots. He took off his swords and placed them near a boulder, on which he later sat.

'Fed the horses.', he said, as he unfolded a piece of cloth, that contained a couple slices of dried meat.

The dwarves looked at him and smiled, as later one of them turned to a barrel to his left and poured in a tankard. 'Here you go, lad...That right there is the best ale you're ever gonna taste !', the dwarf continued handing him the tankard.

'Don't eat that shite ! Come here !', said one of the three dwarves sitting near the fire, moving aside, to make space on the log he sat. 'We've got plenty of food, for us and for you !', he continued, grinning at the sight of those slices of meat, so thin, one could see through. He wore a red gambeson covered in chainmail, had a short hair, and a long beard that began to turn gray. The oldest among the three dwarves, his name was Levi Arlvort.

'So, young witcher...What's your say on this war, eh ?', asked Yoran Craggs as he took a hefty bite from a chicken leg then drank from his tankard. Bald, wore an auburn tunic, and had a short dark braided beard. He was sitting across the fire near another dwarf.

'All that I know is that, war, is a lucrative business.', the witcher replied as he sat down next to Levi.

'Ain't that true...', murmured Levi.

'Might wanna consider heading there after this.', said the red bearded dwarf sitting right of Yoran, Admir Viggis, puffing smoke from his pipe. 'We were lucky you showed up...!'

'...And he saved our skin from those fuckin' winged whores...', added Yoren.

'Thanks to the others. They asked me to look for you three...', the witcher added looking at Yoren's fresh scar above the left eye.

'It was as if they planned to ambush us...', Admir said, puffing smoke.

'Or maybe if you would've checked the damned wheels before we left the mine-!'

'It ain't my bloody fault the road was filled with more potholes than a slice of cheese...', Admir replied. 'They flew down the hill after Nigel and the others descended into the valley and entered the woods.'.

'From the looks of the kills, they didn't eat for days...', the witcher added.

'Damned whores thought we look tasty...!'

'Where did Nigel and the others run into you ?', asked Admir.

'At the crossroads with the path that comes from the western hills of Sodden.', the witcher replied.

'Sodden, eh ?', asked Yoran, murmuring, then looked at Levi. 'Did those cunts join the temerians, yet ?'.

'From what I heard, they prefer to stay neutral.'.

'And why you think that is, lad ?', asked Levi, turning towards the witcher. 'I heard rumors, that before this conflict between Temeria, Lyria and Rivia...King Robbin of Sodden had sent an offer of marriage to one of the two sides fighting against the Lilies...Thus, why his highness has decided to maintain neutrality in this, even though King Cedric of Temeria, and his advisors arranged a marriage proposal, for princess Sophia to his son, prince Griffin...Yet, King Robbin, declined the offer, and stated his neutrality in this conflict anyway...!'

'What about you witcher ? How would you solve this-', said Yoren before being interrupted.

'Witchers don't meddle in politics...', he added.

'Ah, I forgot you lot prefer neutrality as well...', Yoran continued, grinning.

'Alike your kind, here in Mahakam...', the witcher added. 'Stating your neutrality by accepting orders of weapons from Temeria, Lyria and Rivia.'

'And what are we to do ? Decline the coin they offer ?', Yoran responded, laughing, while the other two smiled.

'Where were you heading before running into Nigel ?', asked Admir, puffing smoke.

'The southern hills of Rivia, maybe Toussaint.'

'Toussaint. Been there a couple of years back...', said Levi. 'You wouldn't want to lose a high stakes game of cards in those parts, lad. They strip you bare of coin...'

'You lost ?', asked the witcher.

Levi chuckled. 'Nay. I was the one that won.', he replied beating his chest.

A Light Thread

.XXVIII. A Light Thread.

After days upon days spent in the desert, the arid planes and the green savannas that laid beyond...The Zerrikanians reached the hills at the foot of the Fhuil Mountains, that harbored among their peaks, the Elven City of Yolwelkairr. Where, within the hills, west, on the Naa'l's western shore, sat the home of the tribe Galodo owed a debt.

Amidst the lush hills that stood at the feet of the Fhuil Mountains, the great Naa'l carved it's way, creating a magnificent gorge, atop which stood the bridge that let to the zerrikanian village, and the elven city of Yolwelkair. The height of the gorge was so great that the water flow seemed a continuous white line of foam.

As the caravan stopped before the passing, near the cliffs at the edge of the gorge, Gerd was looking downwards at the foamy course of water.

'Scared of heights, witcher ?', Veya asked mockingly.

'Not as far as I know...'

From behind them Tara approached, and remained silent as she watched them talk.

Veya took a couple of steps ahead of the witcher, while softly moving her head his way. 'Listen Gerd. Once we get to the village- you won't be allowed to wonder around as you wish...Is not that I don't trust you, is that the others won't. You are a foreigner, and my people grew weary of foreigners...', Veya began, staring at the green trees standing across the gorge. 'I know what you can do, witcher, and I appreciated the help you offered this far, and will continue to do so. And I can say I speak for everyone in this caravan...'. She paused, turning her gaze towards the elven bridge to her right, and sighed. 'Remember me to show you to your provisional home within the duration of your stay here, when we arrive. And we will have a- prolonged- talk regarding your stay...', she continued, looking at Gerd, then with a subtle smile, she turned and left towards Biua and Bált, who were arguing over something Veya told them to do.

After Veya stepped away toward Biua and Balt, Tara made a couple of steps towards the witcher. 'You'll like it here. Our people will get used to you, eventually...'

'Is there a problem ?', asked Gerd, turning to face Tara.

'Not really something you ought to be concerned about.', she replied with the intent to withhold information. 'But, since you asked...', she continued with a pleasant smile. 'As you know, Veya is the head of our tribe. And she has been held responsible by The Elders for Galodo's deeds. If we were to not find him so he could be brought to face justice for his crimes, we would've risked a conflict between our tribe and two others. More political than military, in which case we would have the obligation to pay a certain sum. In gold, blood and

warriors over a few years, decades or even generations...This was, and is, meant as a peace offering. We don't know what will happen with him once we get to the village. But he either is given a task that if he manages to complete is rewarded with freedom for his wife, or both could be sentenced to death...'

'Thus, his death is a sure thing.', he replied, whilst looking amidst the zerrikanians making preparations for the final part of their journey, his eyes settled upon the mercenary. 'Executed...Like hanging or decapitation ?'.

'It is. For his most favorable outcome at the moment, is his wife's freedom.', she replied to Gerd previous statement, watching as the soft breeze swayed and rustled the branches of the trees across the gorge. Then proceeded to do the same to his recent inquiry. 'Aside those two, he could also be...Burned alive, beaten to death, forced to fight to death against a chosen champion or beast. Skinned alive. Imprisoned for months in a pitch dark cave, until either starvation or thirst gets him, or until he asks to be executed. Or just thrown off this very bridge with his legs and hands tied...He won't even survive the fall.'

'Plenty of ways he could be killed. I'd prefer one in which I can get his head...', Gerd smirked, watching as Galodo was being taken to his cage by Maa and two other zerrikanians. He had his hands tied, wore no boots, and was dressed in his ragged beige shirt, with a slight smear of blood on his right sleeve, and near his right shoulder. His eyes met Gerd's rather quickly, yet their stare lasted but a few moments as Maa pushed the mercenary ahead.

Tara chuckled. 'I guess we'll see. You should go prepare your horse, it seems we'll leave soon.'

'Right...', the witcher replied, heading towards the trees near which he left his horse, watching as the zerrikanian women, locked the door of Galodo's cage.

Gerd did as Tara advised, and prepared his steed for the ride towards the village, where he'd find out what will come of Galodo's life. Obviously, he'd prefer him to be executed right away. But, as it wasn't his decision, he could only wait and hope to be something that would fall in his favor.

Less than an hour later, the zerrikanians had formed a row behind Veya's horse, ready to cross the gorge, and eager to reach the other side, from where were but a few more miles to their homes in the village of tribe Thyr.

Veya walked near her mare, looked at the men a women behind her, then jumped in the saddle. 'Saddle up ! Our home and your families, are just beyond those hills. We've completed the task. Now, we regain our honor. For after we cross those hills...We are home !', she spoke in the Zerrkanian tongue, which to Gerd sounded as an off-shot elven dialect.

As head of the Thyr Tribe, Veya led the zerrikanian caravan across the bridge, then as she reached the other side she let out a roar and charged at gallop speed ahead, all the while being mirrored by those that followed behind her.

Yolwelkairr, the elven city that has acquired the nickname, City of The Golden Dragon. Constructed and ruled by an Elder Race, allowed the city to last millennia. Ruled by a council, occupied entirely by elves. That unlike their kind west, allowed entry to both humans and non-humans.

It is a shame, for the foreigners that come to these lands, rarely want to return west. A reason out of many other, why there are no mentions of this ancient Elven City. Another, is due to it's location. Built in the Fhuil Mountains, with the sole intention of it being hidden.

Zerrikanians, are described west as barbaric, disorganized and grouped in tribes. Thus, there are very few mentions of the cities that lay here, such as Yolwelkairr. Which for someone traveling east with no zerrikanians along them, cannot possibly find their way to it, or live long enough to reach it. Those that do usually know the infrequent merchant routes, which don't lack the dangers that could lead even the most experienced to death...

Outside Yolwelkairr and at the feet of the Fhuil Mountains, the rest of Zerrikania is separated into territories that belong to a rather large number of tribes. Not much different from the noble houses found west of the Blue Mountains, which, fortunately, lack the political influences found west. As Zerrikania is indeed a free, wild, untamed land, yet the people here aren't anywhere near the image western scholars and professors like to paint. Claiming that these people are barbarians, degenerates for there is nothing to differentiate them from common beasts, is a rather very concerning statement. Not for the zerrikanians, but for the men and women that live west of here. For all claim and state to want and desire freedom, yet, are surprised of what true freedom really is...

True, beasts live by no laws and rules, no lords or monarchs...Only by the will of nature. Yet, here, among what my colleagues west, so vehemently appoint as beasts, there is an equilibrium, that I cannot say one could find anywhere west. It is untrue to say they don't have laws, for I would be so bold to say that their laws are far more efficient than ours, or rather the way they impose those laws. Their justice system truly does not care of who you are, what 'respectable house' you were born in or whether you have a coin to your name, nor does it care in which gods you believe in. It is a sword that no title can stop. True justice. Given, by what my colleagues west would degree as 'Utter nonsense.', and out of spite, would proceed to ask, 'What would a bunch of cripples, high on mushrooms and goat feces know about laws and true justice ?'. Alike, in some regards to the witchers we have west, yet, lacking the mutations and sorcery, these people are similar in many ways to monks, though their faith is not in the divine but the perseverance of knowledge. Born with sickness of various natures, abandoned or orphaned. Once again similar to witchers, these men, and women, are taken in at an early age, no older than 10. They are, If possible, treated, sometimes healed, then their lives be it short or long are spent learning. Their new lives begin and end in a castle, or fortress, in the far north, said to be a place amidst a mountainous formation found there. The zerrikanians and the elves here call them, Elders, or in Elder Speech, Hen or Hÿn.

The Elders, decide which side or sides are at fault, and their decision is fair. For their lives are spent away from our world. Unencumbered, their minds are sharpened and molded for such matters. Their wisdom has been rarely needed in the last century, yet their importance to this land has remained crucial.

Thus, my colleagues are simply fueled by ignorance, lack of perspective, and have a blind faith in a system that often serves anything but the people...

...

The tribes are led by women, great warriors, that since the moment they are born, live and die by the rules of their tribes. From these tribes emerge the ones bearing the titles of Free Warriors.

These tribes roam an untamed land of both beasts and monsters. Which represents the Eternal Struggle for Balance, of forces that press upon each other, self-regulating themselves, based on their needs.

The Thyr tribe, roam the lands near the Fhuil mountains and harbor among them the predecessors of Laleh of Thyr. The famed clan leader who united the tribes against the Haklanders many generations ago. After her victory, the tribes returned to their homelands and continued to communicate among themselves until her death.

Walt von Svarnst's Journal - Zerrikanian Spirit.

The road to the village was quite short, or it seemed that way, due to the faster pace they had after crossing the bridge over the Naa'l. However the road towards the village further displayed the magnificence of the Fhuil Mountains. As after they climbed the first hill, the road traversed a valley filled with the thickest patch of woods one could stumble through, as vast and as teemed with life as the Woods of Brokilon. Then as they climbed once again, the trees turned gradually to shrubbery and thickets, wild cherry trees, pin trees, and high grass, followed by rocks and abrupt slopes then a path through a mountain pass, where the ridges arose alike columns, blocking the silhouette of the sun, now slowly sliding west, toward noon.

Gerd was riding in the middle section of the group, a mere two wagons behind Galodo's. When from beyond the side of a hill covered in small trees and high grass, the home of the zerrikanians appeared in sight, as from behind, Tara approached. 'Here...', she said, handing Gerd a handful of cracked hazelnuts. 'Biua gave me a bag full of them...', she continued, presenting the aforementioned bag of nuts that was dangling near her hip.

The group slowed down, then stopped before entering the homestead of tribe Thyr. Which was the size of a small town one would see west, surrounded by a wall made of carved stones, dug out of the hill north of the town. From outside, only the roofs made of reed or straw could be seen, and beneath the ridge from where the rock used for the wall was obtained, stood a taller building, made from what seemed to be clay.

'What are we stopping for?', asked Tara, seeing the riders and wagons ahead come to a halt, as Bált, who was among the first riders to follow close behind Veya while crossing the bridge. He awaited by the side of the road for the middle side of the group to catch up, mostly to inform the others about the earliest developments. Thus, after he joined the rest of the caravan, he slowed his pace, and was now riding alongside Tara.

'It seems we arrived at the same time the rest of the Norhians did.', Bált answered, as the rest of the group stopped.

'And The Elders ?', she asked trying to see what was happening ahead.

'They arrived yesterday...!'

'Veya ?'.

'She rode ahead with Maa and Biua, then both accompanied by Arva and one of her warriors, have entered the city at the request of The Elders.'.

'Did the Walahians arrive as well ?'.

'I heard no mention of them...!'

As the head of the group advanced through the gates, three Norhian riders approached the wagon transporting Galodo from the right side of the group.

'Come on...!', Tara said observing the three Norhian riders approach, recognizing one of them. 'She might do something stupid...!', she continued, then turned to Gerd. 'Take the left side.', she said shaking the reins and hurried toward the wagon, followed by Bált, and Gerd who advanced on the left side of the group.

Nerva, an archer of the Norhian tribe, arrived first at Galodo's wagon, quickly getting off her mare's saddle, leaving the others behind. . 'Sibh-', she said to one of the men standing near the wagon. 'Téigh !'. The man did as she ordered without any questions and took a couple steps from the wagon to her left side, while the Norhian riders arrived as well, one stopped in front of the wagon near the driver, and the other dismounted at the back.

Due to the digger's attack, Galodo's wagon has been reduced mostly to an iron cage covered with a yellow blanket that was tied around the base sides of the bars, which offered him some shade during the day. It was placed on the backside of the wagon, followed by the bench on which the driver sat, separated by a chest and a couple of planks.

He sat down, with his legs crossed and his back against the back side of the cage, looking at the rays of light protruding through the canvas roof, when Nerva slid her hand over the bars. Her dark hair, was cut short, with a lock of hair falling down her cheekbones, and her heart shaped jaw. A necklace was dangling by her neck, made of braided animal hair, decorated with silver parts shaped alike teeth. Below, an olive nuanced cloth, covered her chest across which traversed the rope from her bow and the straps of her quiver. While lower she wore a black leather belt, from which hanged a knife, then a tulip-skirt of the same color, and sandals.

'Ceádmil, mús...!', she began, as Galodo's eyes sluggishly fell upon her figure. 'Sibh- mire aen te treise ess céad, mús.', she continued mockingly, as her thin lips expressed an unpleasant smirk.

The mercenary replied with a subtle click of his tongue, then looking away, he whispered through his teeth. 'Varh'he...!'

In a blink of Galodo's eyes, Nerva reached through the bars and grabbed him by his ragged shirt and pulled him towards her. Then as soon as his face hit the bars, she grabbed the back of his neck, quite forcefully holding his mug against the bars.

At the same time, Tara, Gerd and Bált reached the wagon. 'Voe'rle Nerva !', Tara said, rushing to reach her. 'Nerva !', she called again, placing her right hand on Nerva's shoulder, slightly raising her voice. The Norhian warrior turned her head, looking at Tara and Bált.

'Neén !', Narva replied, taking her right hand from Galodo's neck to remove Tara's hand from her shoulder, while quickly grabbing him again with her left one. 'Aé cáemm aep mire. Aé miann aep mire aen sù'lean. Aep mire an marw dh'oine.'.

Tara took a couple of steps away from her. 'Va fáill.', she continued, keen on avoiding a quarrel with her or the others. Insisting that Nerva and her riders have to leave, at once.

'Yeá...!', Nerva replied, letting go of the grasp she had on Galodo's neck, looking at Gerd and Bált. 'Va fáill.'.

The Norhians returned to their horses and rode back to their camp, situated on the southeastern side of the town.

'I wasn't in need of your help.', Galodo said, as Tara approached his cage.

'Good, because you won't get any next time.', she replied, then left and mounted her steed and advanced towards the front side of the wagon.

The wagon proceeded toward the gate of the town, as Galodo resumed his staring at the light piercing through the canvas laid on top of the cage. Biua, who rode ahead to enter the town with Veya and the head of the Norhian tribe, Arva. Was awaiting by the gate to oversee the rest of her people enter the town, especially, she was awaiting for both Galodo and his wife's wagon, and to have a talk with Tara and Bált, who were behind Galodo's wagon, closely followed by Gerd.

She quickly jumped in the saddle, behind Tara. 'Quicken the pace a smidge.', Biua said with a low voice, as Tara passed the wagon. 'They decided to bring him in front of the Elders, today.', she continued with the same tone, after they passed by a few of the wagons ahead.

'Explains why Nerva was so anxious.'.

'Huh ?'.

'She came to see him earlier...!'

'Well...The Norhians are quite sure he's going to die today.', Biua replied, taking the water flask Tara had in the right pocket of her saddle and drank. 'I heard that as soon as they arrived, Nerva and Arva requested a meeting with The Elders, where they proposed that the proceedings of the trial have to be hastened. It seems that The Elders approved...!'

'They cannot request such a meeting, without all the Tribe leaders.'

'Apparently, they invoked 'Special Conditions' be applied to this trial as well.'

'What special conditions ?'.

'I do not know...'

Tara puffed. 'I guess we'll find out soon enough.'

'Witcher !', Biua called, turning. 'From what I heard, you might get his head today.'

'I might ?'.

'Probably...'

'What about those special conditions you mentioned. Won't they interfere with it ?'.

Biua smiled. 'Your kind's hearing is impressive. They could, yes.'

'Then I might not have his head in a bag today as well.', Gerd replied, now riding alongside them.

'We'll see...Make haste.', Biua said, slapping Tara's thigh, as they quickened their pace towards the northern side of the town.

Thus Gerd stepped onto the first paved streets he saw since he left toward the pass through the Blue Mountains. The first town he saw since, the first markets, the first community of both humans and non-humans, the first taverns and inns.

'What's it called ?', asked Gerd, looking around.

'What do you mean ?', Biua replied.

'The town.'

Tara chuckled. 'Aeldúrr.'

Biua smiled seeing the witcher lay his eyes on a tavern. 'Thirsty ? Don't bother for now. But, once the trial is done, you'll have plenty to drink.', she said, then cupped Tara's left breast. '...And fuck.', she resumed, laughing.

Aeldúrr, was shaped alike a triangle, with its tips pointing toward northwest, southwest and east.

Beyond the southern walls, the town expanded north and east, more than what one could've imagined when first laying eyes on it. Thus, through the southwestern gate, this side of the town was mostly populated by non-humans, most businesses found in this area were of dwarven blacksmiths and elven armorers, tailors and taverns. Most of them owned by elves,

half-elves, halflings and dwarves, or even humans. The town was separated in three districts. The south-western district, or Ddŵr District, as a mountain spring separated it from the rest. Besides the residences of the folk living there, it was occupied by businesses and markets. The northern district, Hedyn District, for it is where the seeds of the Thyr tribe were first seated, as it was where the leader of the tribe had her residence. It was the town's oldest side, for the first settlers built their homes in the northern hills and spread east, then south. While to the east, stretching towards the northwestern side of the Naa'l, Gwawr District, or just Eastern District, mostly occupied by the residences of the warriors and town-guards, and stables near the eastern gate, beyond which, in the last five decades, farmers began to build a small settlement and work the lands found there, west of the Naa'l.

Not long, Biua, Tara, Balt and Gerd, have arrived in the Northern district, at the leader's residence. Where the Walahian and Norhian tribes, awaited for their arrival. As the trial of Galodo was to begin shortly.

The trial took place outside, in front of the leader's home. The home itself was made of wood, built on a skeleton of thick wooden beams, and was entirely shaped like a roof, sitting in a circle paved with cubic stone, from which a seven steps of stairs led down to the front yard. The Elders were to be seated at a table with three chairs, as the tribe leaders stood up, on the left and right side of the table, within the circle. While Galodo was to stand in front of The Elders and the tribe leaders, near the steps.

Thus, after everyone took their positions, The Elders stepped out of the leader's home, and proceeded towards their seats at the table, near which stood on the right, Veya and on the left Arva and to her left, Kayr, the leader of the Walahian tribe. The Elders were represented by two old men and a younger woman. The eldest sat in the middle, and the youngest, which was the woman, to his left, and on the right the second oldest of the three. There was nothing placed on the table and none of the people present at the trial had been allowed to bare weapons, as all of those present were warriors of the tribes.

While Gerd, stood on the second row, behind Bált, Biua, Maa and Tara.

All three of them were dressed in grey cloaks. The two men had their heads shaven, while the woman had her hair cut short.

'Ceádmil.', the eldest began, addressing the leaders and their people present at the trial in Elder Speech. 'Bring forth the accused.', he continued with a raspy voice.

And so Galodo was brought forth, in front of The Elders, to answer for the crimes he was accused off by the Norhian and Walahian tribes.

The woman left of the eldest of the Hŷn, whispered a few words in his ear. She was his assistant, or as most would put it, his eyes. For at such old age, his sight began to dwindle. Therefore, she would tell him what she saw, in the face expressions and body language of the leaders, the accused and of those present.

The eldest, smiled softly. 'Be kind and remove his shackles. He, is to take part in a fair trial, 'till it is concluded, he's still considered a free man. One doesn't need good eyes to be aware

of the tension found here. Thus, I understand the strong desire for this man, to face justice, but it must be done in a just fashion. True, he is accused with murder, thievery and fleeing from justice. Yet, of all those three, we all have done murder, be it in defense, out of spite, for gold or as an order. I too, as a young man, have committed murder, and I too, chose to flee. Until one day, when hungry, thirsty and tired, I found myself standing at a crossroad. Where I had to choose, and I chose right. Were I to choose left, I would've died of hunger and thirst. However, as I chose right, that path led me here today. Thus, we all must choose the right path, even if the right path isn't the easiest path. For to come to the realizations of your own actions, isn't and easy process, it is encumbered with denial and selfishness. But in the end, we all have to face the consequences of our actions, in one way or another...!.

After the eldest finished talking, the second oldest, sitting to his right cleared his throat, and stood up. 'Present your evidence against the accused.', then sat back down. While Arva, stepped forward.

She pulled out of a satchel a handful of necklaces, such as the one she wore. 'Those were worn by my warriors.', she said, placing them on the table. 'Warriors I have lost because of him.', she continued, returning to her previous position on the left side of The Elders.

Then, Kayr stepped forward, and one of her warriors handed her a chest armor, an arrow, and a crossbow. 'This is the armor my brother wore. This is the arrow that pierced his chest, and ended his life. And this is a crossbow the accused left behind while fleeing.', then after placing the evidence on the table, she stepped back as well, leaving the Elders to glance over the evidence presented against Galodo.

'Do you acknowledge to have committed the crimes of which you are accused?', spoke the one on the right. 'And, do you acknowledge that this crossbow was once your property?'.

After a few moments of silence, Galodo responded. 'No.'.

The eldest chuckled as the woman to his left, whispered in his ear. 'I sense certainty in your words. Yet, I also sense, deceit.', he said, then sighed. 'I understand you have a family, is that right?'.

'It is.'.

'Then, think of them. I've been informed that your wife is present at this trial.'.

'She is.'.

'Think of her, as well. I understand she was, alike your men, an accomplice to your crimes. Therefore, your wife's trial is connected to this one. Yet, partially, her wellbeing is in the grasp of your hands. The mother of your children...!.

'She took no lives nor did steal valuables. She just followed after me.', Galodo said, prepared to plead for the safety of his wife.

'I understand.', the eldest said, after the woman whispered in his ear.

Then the man sitting to his right cleared his throat. 'Galodo Frock. Do you acknowledge to have committed the crimes of which you are accused of ? And, that this crossbow was once your property ?'.

Galodo looked at The Elders, then attempted to reply. 'I-'.

'I have a question for the accused.', Arva interrupted, making a couple of steps toward him.

'Approved, ask away...', replied the eldest.

Therefore, Arva, cleared her throat and proceeded to ask her question. 'In the night of your carriage robbery...', she began, viciously staring Galodo down. 'On the road to Walachia, south of the village of Jeva. Once my warriors had been killed, the drivers neck slashed, and the horses cut loose. What did you do, when you realized that it didn't transport even a pinch of gold ?'.

Galodo didn't reply, nor did he look at Arva. He just stared at a crack in the stairs leading to the place she, The Elders and the other tribe leaders stood.

'Did you kill the passengers ?', she asked, stopping near the stairs. 'Or were they dead when you looked insi-'.

'I didn't kill the child !', he responded. quickly approaching the stairs. 'The child escaped in the woods with a woman...!'

'You are lying- If he and the-'.

'Why would I lie about killing a child !?', Galodo replied, shaken by her inquiry.

'There were no tracks leading off the road into the woods. If you-'.

'I did not ! Nor did my men as I told them to not give chase. We watched them escape into the woods-', Galodo interrupted her, before being cut off himself.

'Enough !', the one on the right said, then placed his right hand on the eldest's left shoulder.

'He didn't kill the child, Arva. And we believe him.', the eldest continued after a few moments.

'He is-', Arva spoke before being stopped by the one sitting to the eldest's right.

'Silence.'.

'He speaks no falsehood. We heard in his voice and seen in his gestures and movements, that he regrets this deed. He did not kill the child. But he did murder the others. Your warriors...And your brother. Therefore, based on witnesses that validate that this crossbow was indeed, the accused's property. As well as the statements given by his men, captured while fleeing, regarding the planning of the crimes, and the unfolding of his plan. The accused is found guilty, of murder, attempted thievery, and fleeing from justice, and is sentenced, to death.', the eldest spoke.

From among those present, the sighs and cries of a woman cut through the silence. She was quickly picked from the ground and taken away by two men.

'However...', the eldest resumed, while Galodo's eyes were still clinched, at the sound of his wife's cries. 'Due to the 'Special Conditions' of this trial. We feel obliged, to request that the accused has to find the child. And return him to his home, north, in the city of Apoka, where after his return, his death sentence will be executed.'

He quickly opened his eyes and was quite astonished by the request. 'How am I supposed to find a boy that disappeared years ago ?! I'm no tracker-', Galodo replied, clueless of how could he locate the child.

'True, you are not. But, among us there is an individual that is. Hailed from the western lands, beyond the Blue Mountains. A trained tracker and monster-slayer, a witcher.', spoke the eldest.

Gerd sitting behind Tara, Maa, Biua and Bált, made sense of a few of the words The Elder spoke. However he did understand the mention of his trade, and the western lands.

The one on the right, addressed Veya, then looked to the left side of the crowd. 'Witcher. Step forth.', he said in the common tongue.

So, Gerd stepped forth from among the crowd, advancing towards the stairs.

'Ceádmil, vatt'ghern.', the second oldest of the three replied in Elder Speech. 'We are honored to meet you, witcher.', he began, in the common tongue.

'Most of us, only read in books about your kind, and very few got to see one in person. Your kind is a rather, rare sight in those parts...', the eldest chuckled. 'Do I understand right ? That, you are uneducated in Elder Speech ?'.

'Not entirely. I understand some of it... And I understood that you want me to help him find the child.'

The eldest softly smiled. 'I'm glad you put your youth's Elder Speech lessons to use.'

'Indeed, we desire you to aid us, in finding the child. As we know the phrase, 'No witcher has ever worked for free.', we intend to properly respect your trade.'

'Also, we understand you have a contract on this man's head. We, need to ensure that he'll complete this task. And if he diverts from his mission or attempts to flee once more, you are to stop him no matter the cost.', the eldest continued.

'Therefore...', began the one on the right. 'Would you accept this contract ?'.

Gerd looked at the Elders, the tribe leaders and then at Galodo. 'I do.', he finally replied.

The elder on the right, bowed his head in gratitude, then sat down, while the eldest raised from his chair. 'Now, the other matter at hand. Regarding the wife's involvement in the crimes committed by the husband. We have decided that she mustn't be punished for the crimes he

and his men committed. As in our eyes, she stood by her husband, as any loving wife would do. And we cannot punish someone, for love. Therefore she's been found not guilty. Thus, she's free to return west.', the Elder spoke in Elder Speech, then the other two raised from their chairs and stepped away from the table. 'This trial has been concluded.', he continued, leaving the table. 'Va fáill.'

As the men and women left the front yard of the leader's residence, The Elders proceeded towards Gerd, near which was Tara and Maa.

'Vatt'ghern.', said the eldest approaching. 'We, and the leaders would like to discuss details of your contract inside. Would you be so kind, to join us ?'.

While Gerd joined The Elders, Arva and Kayrr inside Veya's home, Biua and Nerva escorted Galodo inside. They all sat at a table in the main chamber, while Maa, and Nerva along with the Walahian warriors, stood up, behind their respective tribe leader. As Gerd and Galodo, stood up, near the door, at the end of the table...

Unknown Onward

.XXIX. Unknown Onward.

At Gerd's most recent request, most of those present in the chamber chose to remain silent and shift their eyes towards Arva and Kayr, who argued with the witcher but a few moments ago over information and the amounts of gold he'd be rewarded with once the contract was completed. While Galodo, Veya and Biua barely said a couple of words since they've gathered to discuss the witcher's contract.

Arva's first reaction had been the squint of her green eyes, followed by a subtle sigh, as if his demand simply amused her. 'We appreciate your help, witcher. But, nor I or my people trust you enough, so we would give an advancement on your contract...', spoke Arva, the head of the Norhi Tribe. While Gerd, knowing he overreached with his previous demand, wasn't surprised she declined. 'We aren't as trustful of foreigners as the Thyrs are, who had welcomed more than enough of you here. We aren't as curious or forward thinking as they are either, for we still have faith in our foremothers beliefs and customs, legends and myths. Even though there are similarities between our tribal laws and faiths, around these parts, most would argue we live in ignorance, isolated, yet we would reply that so do all the other tribes both northeast and southeast of here. For ignorance, proved, and seems to be the most common philosophy, with which we can preserve our old ways. Therefore, I mean no disregard to you or your craft, but so is my people's way.'

To Veya's surprise whom aimed to haggle just a few moments ago, Arva's words didn't just explain the reason she declined Gerd's demand, but offered an insight to a Norhi Philosophy, that Arva's predecessors never had the humility to share. As her words calmed most of the people present in the room, and caught the attention of others. As all began to appreciate the openness and wise view, Arva had of her people, their history and tradition. While for Gerd, her words spoke of preservation mostly, of respecting the past and history of her people. Of her greatest concern, being the continuation of the work her predecessors had done, without erasing their mistakes or by taking away the glory of their triumphs, but instead embracing their flawed nature, and learn from it. She spoke with love of her people, portraying herself as a selfless leader, her mind entirely occupied by the welfare of her people.

'Master witcher, as it seems...', the elder began with a scent of pride and admiration as he looked to his right at Arva. 'You shall receive your payment once you've completed the contract. However, as I have noticed and was informed, you require equipment, as most of your valuable gear was lost during the incident that occurred within the Korath Desert. Thus, before you set out tomorrow, do visit the local armorers for the required pieces of equipment. As all costs will be covered by the employers.', the elder continued, then at the wave of his right hand, Kayr, leader of the Walahian tribe, handed one of her warriors a parchment that she delivered into the hand of the Elder sitting left of the eldest.

He cleared his throat standing up. 'Now, as the financial aspects of the contract have been settled, the other matter at hand would be the knowledge you've previously requested, master

witcher. Please approach the table.', said the second oldest of the three, handing the parchment to Veya, who in turn gave it to Biua.

As soon as the scroll reached his hands, he opened it, and after a few moments of silence, he replied with a grin and a chuckle, as his face then turned stiff. 'It's blank.', he continued.

'You know your details, witcher.', the warrior standing behind Kayr said scornfully. 'We're not going to make his task any easier.', she continued with a nod towards Galodo, who didn't even show the slightest bit of concern, nor was he as absorbed as Gerd into arguing with them.

While the witcher, slightly annoyed by the lack of information he received, yet trying to not show his frustration, he set his eyes upon Arva, then Kayr. 'Is the child even alive ?'.

'Yes.', Kayr replied.

'How come you know that, but don't know his whereabouts ?', Gerd asked placing the scroll on the table.

Aware, that Gerd knew very little of their people, Arva proceeded to explain Kayr's vague answer. 'A priestess, sister of the woman accompanying the child, had multiple visions through out the years regarding the child. Visions that confirmed his wellbeing, yet neither of her visions revealed a location.'.

'Twin sister ?', asked Gerd, while Arva replied with a nod. 'I'd wager you've sent search parties too ?'.

'We did.', she responded. 'But, soon their efforts proved futile, and because our parties cannot cross into other tribes territories without raising suspicion, we had to resort to other ways...!'

'Such as ?'.

'There's little reason to feed you any more information...!', Nerva intervened. 'For none would prove useful in locating the child. We understand this isn't going to be an easy task. If you concern yourself about finding the child, know that you are doing it in vain. For it's not your place to do so. You are supposed to aid him, and the child, is entirely his responsibility.', she continued, as she laid her eyes onto the mercenary at the end. 'For if your search takes long enough, and all your efforts will prove unfruitful and lead to nothing but frustration and outrage, you'll be witness to an old habit of his. For then he'll do as he always does, he will attempt to flee. That's what you should be concerned about.'.

To Gerd's disappointment, all the information given had been almost useless beyond the priestess's and boy's description and names, as the two tribes didn't plan nor could make their quest easier. Thus, by the end, he was just as clueless as before, yet with a slight admiration for the punishment Galodo was given, as a simple death sentence would've been merciful, when compared to sending him to pick the trail of a child and priestess they themselves couldn't find or perhaps be bothered to look for. And as Nerva pointed out, his main concern was assisting Galodo, while also acting as an executioner if such need would arise.

Thus, as all of Gerd's necessary contract details had been discussed, the meeting had been ended with a few words from the Elders. Followed by a few talks between the leaders, while The Elders themselves entered in a conversation with the witcher, regarding his trade, his thoughts on western society and certain religious groups found there. After which Gerd stepped out of Veya's home, and shortly found a place to rest. Not far from the stairs, right of the stone paved path leading to them, beneath a tree.

As a few moments later, Tara herself stepped out of her leader's residence and was heading towards him.

'I must say, you people have a peculiar sense of justice...', Gerd said as Tara sat near him and replied with a smile and a nudge to Gerd's right shoulder. 'Did you know they had in mind to hire me ?'.

'No.', she answered, watching as the soft afternoon breeze caressed the trees sitting on the opposite side of the path leading down the stairs from Veya's home, beneath which Arva and Kayr along with Nerva were. 'They must've thought of it, when word got out, that a witcher travelled with us. The interesting part is that The Elders considered their proposal, which in turn affected the outcome of the trial. If you hadn't been here, he would've lost his head by now.'.

'Veya knew nothing of the child ?', he asked watching through the tree branches as a couple of clouds traversed the blue sky.

'No. Hasn't been mentioned before.'.

'Why hide it ?'.

'I have no idea. There were multiple occasions in which such a matter could've been mentioned. They must've been unsure whether the child was alive or not. They must be sure of it now...', she replied, as on the paved path stretching from the house towards the stairs, Veya approached.

'Have you seen Biua ?', she asked while Tara shook her head in disagreement, as Veya continued with a sigh. 'It seems The Elders had decided to leave tomorrow, early in the morning. While, Arva and Kayr, along with their people, will remain here two more days to prepare for their journey back.', she said, as from the gate Maa was heading towards them. 'As for The Elders, all the preparations have been made for their departure, so there are no other matters with which any of us should be preoccupied with.'.

'About tomorrow, regarding Gerd's equipment-'.

'What of it ?', interrupted Veya before Tara could explain, giving a squint of her blue eyes, as she realized what Tara was about to ask. 'Biua offered to accompany him and translate if there might be the need to do so. You, have other duties...Anything else ?'.

'No.', Tara replied, giving off an impression of slight disappointment.

'Good.', Veya said, before Maa approached them. 'Where have you been ?'.

'Helped with the rest of the stuff we had to unload and place into storage. Why, was I needed here ?'.

'No.', Veya replied, then turned to Tara. 'Is there anything else ?', as she noticed Tara seemed lightly irritated.

'Nothing else.', she answered, calmly.

'Then, we'll see each other in the morning.', Veya said, shifting her attention towards Maa.

'Aren't you going to join us for a couple of drinks ?', Maa asked. 'Witcher ?'.

'He won't be joining you and nor will Tara or I, for we have still some matters to discuss.'.

Maa replied with a nod and a grin, which didn't pass unnoticed by Veya, who replied with a squint and a sigh, as Maa left towards the gate.

'What's there to discuss ?', asked Gerd. 'Are there other things I should be aware of ?'.

'Just the matter of where you'll sleep tonight...', she said, shifting her gaze to Tara. 'I leave this matter to you.', then with a nod, she left towards where Nerva and Arva were.

Tara, a bit surprised of how Veya laid this matter on her lap, stood up. 'Follow me.', she said, taking a few steps toward Veya's home.

'Where to ?', Gerd asked following after.

'You'll see, it's not far.', she replied, as they went past Veya's home, heading towards the side of the hill, where stretched upwards, were about a dozen of steps dug in stone, leading up the rocky hill behind the leaders home.

When they reached the middle section of the steps from beyond the tip of the hill, the thatched roof of a hut built out of stone appeared in sight. Near it where a couple of apple trees sitting both beyond a small bridge placed over a mountain spring, which led to the front door of the hut. From beyond which puffs of steam rose and disappeared while being picked up by the soft breeze.

'A hot spring ?', Gerd asked as they crossed the bridge over the mountain spring.

'Mhm. It'll help you relax and I thought you'd enjoy a bath as well.'.

'A bath does sound good.'.

'I thought so...', she replied with a smile, then opened the door.

The first chamber was similar to a small hallway, filled with about a dozen of drawers on the wall opposed to the door, separated in half by a doorway leading out of the hallway. Out of which, Biua came, naked, drying her hair with a towel, as she heard Tara's voice.

'Anyone asked about me ?', she said turned to Tara, who was unbuckling her belt.

'Veya did.', Tara answered, ready to take off her top.

'And ?'.

'We've nothing to be preoccupied with as of now.'.

'Hmm, good. It's about time.', she replied, then her attention was drawn away from Tara by a few clinks coming from her left. 'Witcher.', she said looking beyond the side of the drawers, as Gerd was in his trousers.

'Biua.', Gerd replied, locking eyes with her, then shortly resumed his attention to folding his shirt. 'So, this is where you fled in such a hurry ?', he said mockingly.

She replied with a smile, as she walked towards the witcher. 'What if I did ?', she asked sliding in between him and the drawers, while slipping her fingers beyond his unbuckled trousers. 'Don't tease me, witcher. When, I can so easily tease you back...', she continued biting her lower lip. 'Well, I guess I'll see you two in the pool.', she resumed then left the hallway.

Shortly, so did Tara. 'The baths are to the right.', she said before leaving.

Thus, once he was fully undressed, he covered his privates with a towel and advanced out of the previous hallway into another and to the right chamber, where the baths were. Unexpectedly, Tara was there as well, leaned forward as she reached for a stool to sit on, then turned to Gerd as she heard him enter. Witcher or not, he doubted any man would've found it easy to keep his eyes focused entirely on hers, as from time to time his would attempt to dip lower, and he knew they didn't do so without being noticed.

A few moments later, moments which both spent in silence. Not because neither knew what to say, but on the contrary, for there were plenty of topics they could talk about. Regarding the benefits of steam to one's health, the fondness they have developed for one another, and Gerd's need of an object with a reflecting surface. And probably, for the sake of continuing with the same futile exercise, he addressed the latter. 'Is there a mirror I could use for shaving ?', Gerd asked, sitting in the tub with a razor in his right hand, with a sudden aching desire to knock himself over the head and render himself unconscious, tilt to one side then sink beneath the water and probably drown.

'There's one on the cupboard behind you.', she replied while running the soap over her bare chest and shoulders.

Therefore, he stood up, covered himself with a towel, and got out of the wooden tub, turning around towards the cupboard, where on it he found the mirror.

'You are rather silent since we've come here. Is everything all right ?', she asked, while Gerd reapplied soap foam on his left cheek with a brush.

'It is, I just did not expect you to take me to a bathhouse.', he replied as he started to shave his right cheek. 'I might've expected a tavern...!'

She chuckled. 'I didn't think you would miss alcohol that much.', she said, washing off the soap foam from her chest and abdomen.

'I don't, I-'

'It's fine. It's because of me, isn't it ? You expected to be alone in here...'

'I don't mind you being here.', he replied.

'Therefore, you are pleased with me being here ?', she teased.

'I-', he said, then stopped and followed with a hiss.

Her reply was a soft smile and an almost inaudible giggle to most ears. 'I should've told you about Biua being here as well...', she continued.

'You two come here often ?', he asked resuming shaving.

'It's a bathhouse which has a hot spring outside, what do you think ? Of course we do. True, it's rather small, but far better than all the other bathhouses in Aeldúrr.'

'Walt told me a few years before he made his way here. That your people are quite obsessive over bathing and cleanliness, and alike the Nilfgaardians consider body hair, and beards unclean.'

'Obsess...', she scoffed. 'How could you not, unless you are a mine worker or pig farmer, one should be always concerned about their hygiene.'

'Or a witcher.', Gerd added.

'Your mutations make you invulnerable to most kinds of sickness resulted from bad hygiene-'

'Not immunity to infections of uncleaned wounds or unchanged dressings. It's is among the worst kinds of bothers a witcher could have aside from finding work. Because, if you won't tend to them, you might find your movement restricted later, and then, even a common drowner contract could be your last.'

'Aren't your witcher potions supposed to be effective against infections ?', she asked as she stood up, and approached the tub.

'Depends on the infection, the wound and the amount of blood loss, which in turn can decrease one's tolerance for a potion's toxicity.', Gerd responded, while she came closer to him.

'Mhm.', she murmured softly, as she moved her index finger along three scars running diagonally on his right scapula. 'What kind of beast gave you this one ?'. she continued, as Gerd's back muscles shivered.

'A leshen.', he replied while carefully shaving the few remaining bits of facial hair beneath his chin.

'Was that a long time ago ?', she asked, as her right hand wandered even lower.

'It was...', he answered, placing the razor on the cupboard. As he felt her delicate breasts brush against his back, while her breath grew louder.

As then, she rested her forehead between his shoulder blades, while removing the towel, wrapping her hands around his lower abdomen. 'You even have a scar on your left butt-cheek...', she continued with a sweet chortle.

To which he replied with a chuckle. 'I know...', while she moved her head upwards, until her lips touched his back, as her fingers trickled downwards, until they wrapped around his shaft. He gave a shivering exhale, tightened his jaw and arm muscles, leaning his head forward, then attempted to turn. And once he did so, his eyes immediately locked on Tara's. She kissed his sternum, while his hand moved upwards along her hips, abdomen and soft breasts until his palm reached her left cheek, moving aside a few locks of hair behind her ear, as then his lips touched with hers.

She gave a soft murmur, as their lips parted, while her left hand, followed along the mark which crossed Gerd's right buttock.

'How about you ?', he asked turning her around. 'How about this one, running down your thigh ?', he continued, moving his left hand downwards along her spine, taking a handful of her right shapely buttock on his way to the mark she had on her thigh.

She chuckled. 'Fell while climbing, I was about ten or eleven. Scratched myself on the side of-', she replied, then stopped as she felt his left hand reach between her legs.

'Why did you stop ?', he asked, as he moved aside a few locks of her hair, kissing the right side of her neck, whilst lower, his fingers gently stirred in a circular fashion.

Tara sighed while turning. 'I don't know...', she replied, gazing into his eyes, as her lips softly touched the side of his mouth, while Gerd's left hand clenched around her right breast, whilst his right remained unmoved on her left hip.

It didn't take long for them to get into the motion of things. For after quite an amount of time they spent entirely preoccupied with the prelude and the exploration of each others bodies. Gerd firmly sat Tara onto the towel he wore, laid over the wet floor of the bath which was filled with a thin layer of steam, soon to become a vessel of their urges, Tara's delicate moans, Gerd's muffled grunts and heavy breathing.

'Can I ask you a question ?', Gerd asked laying on the floor next to Tara, resting his back against the wooden tub.

'Mhm...', Tara murmured with a thoughtful gaze directed towards the ceiling, as her head was leaning against Gerd's shoulder.

'Where am I going to sleep ?', he asked, as she turned her head right, facing him.

'Who said you'll get any sleep ?', she said, kissing his shoulder. Then with a chuckle she replied to his question. 'We, could sleep here...', she continued with a smile.

'I don't know about you, but I would prefer a bed...!'

'There's a bed across the hall.', she said moving on top of him, touching her forehead to his, followed by a deep sigh. 'I should get you in that pool...!'

'Why ?', he asked placing his right hand on her thigh and his left on her hip, all the while he started kissing her neck.

'Biua.', she replied, leaning backwards. 'Come.', she continued, standing up.

And as he seemed confused she proceeded to explain...

'This is her home. Alike me, she's one of the Tribal Guards, sworn to protect the head of our tribe. Therefore Veya offered her this hut. While I was offered a room in her home.'

'So, it would be rude for me not to, since she welcomed me in her home, right ?'.

'Quite.', she replied, reaching to open the door.

'Should've told me that sooner...', he said, as then he picked his towel up and walked out of the bathroom into the hallway.

Tara chuckled. 'I was...distracted.'.

'Biua owns a bathhouse...', he said, as both he and Tara walked down the hallway, towards the thermal pool.

'This used to be the leader's home many generations ago, back when Laleh of Thyr was head of our tribe. While the one which, the current leader, Veya, uses as her home, was built by Laleh, about ten years before her passing, after the end of the war with the Haaklanders, and was used as the leaders home ever since.'

'Your people loved Laleh, didn't they ?'.

'While she was alive, she was beloved and cherished by all of Zerrikania, all the tribes to the north, south and east of here prayed to the gods for her wellbeing. Her image is portrayed in the tribes banners, which we hold up with much pride.'

'She was a dragon ?', Gerd asked with a scent of awe, as he never had the honor of meeting nor seeing one in his lifetime.

'Yes. Her lineage was the source of our tribes name, as the first who built a small village here, laying the foundations of Aeldúrr, was a dragon, called Thyrvarsttaveh, offspring of Zerrikanterment, the golden dragon, revered throughout this land. It is said that one day, she met a group of men and women, young and old, which fled from the savage lands of the far east. As she was treating their sick and injured, she heard stories of the pain they've suffered through to get here, the lives they've lost while escaping their captors, the infamous slavers

which extended their operations northwest, where they attacked villages, killed the old, and took the young. All from the port they've made on the shores of the Eastern Sea. The vicious blood tribes, practitioners of anthropophagy. Which drained the bodies of blood, said to combine it with cow milk and drink it as if it was mead, using human and non-human skin and bones for tools. And aside from them, there were the foul creatures, the old and the new, spawn of The Conjunction of the Spheres. Therefore, she offer them this land, and through time and generations she became one of them, their leader, and our tribe was born.'

'There had been no dragon since then ?', he asked gripped by the tale Tara just told him.

'Since Laleh, Aeldurr hasn't been home to one. No. She was the last of her kind in all of Zerrikania, as no other descendants of Zerrikanterment were believed to be still alive. She had no offspring, thus her lineage became extinct. Some tribes alike the Norhi consider it's due to the change in our beliefs, as most of the people believe such stories to be myths, some besides the elves in Yolwelkair consider that even Zerrikanterment is a myth.'

'The Norhi know very little of our lands. I've seen their people's faces, when we opened the gates. For them development means we furthered from our roots, and what Laleh strived to achieve...', Biua said from the side of the pool. 'As far as I know Dragons used to visit their towns and villages too. They don't anymore, so how hypocritical must they be to say that we distanced from our traditions and customs.', she scoffed. 'Abandoned the old in favor of the new...'

'West, is believed that dragons are extinct.', said Gerd, while Biua raised from the pool.

Biua snorted. 'At the same time, many in the west, believe vampires are susceptible to garlic and a stake through the chest...'

Gerd replied with a chuckle, while Biua, walked over to a table not far from the pool, from where she picked up a golden goblet and drank from it. Then proceeded to enter back into the water, and so did Gerd and Tara. Gerd sat down, and with a grunt he leaned his back against the side of the pool then followed with a sigh.

'You ought to know...', Biua began, as she and Tara approached Gerd, who sluggishly laid his eyes on them. 'I made you a promise, that once the trial is done, you'll have plenty to drink...And fuck.', she continued, taking hold of Tara's hip, as then she made her way downwards to her cheek, which she grasped firmly. Reaching between her cheeks, sliding her fingers further forwards, as she then moved towards Gerd, sitting in his lap, reaching beneath the water, all the while Tara's lips were occupied with his...

The next day, come morning, Gerd, feeling both of his arms numb, and unable to turn, his eyes opened to a sight he hadn't seen in quite some time. With Tara to his right and Biua to his left, both using his shoulders as pillows, then with a yawn, he fell back asleep. As a few hours later, he was awoken by Tara's soft voice, as well as by the gentle grasp she had of a certain area.

His eyes opened with difficulty, accompanied by another yawn. 'Morning...', Tara said, as her lips lightly touched his. 'Are you well rested ?', she asked.

'I am.', he replied with a gravelly voice. 'Biua ?'.

'She had a few duties to attend to, and asked me to wake you up...'.

He chuckled. 'Well, you did wake me, along with-'.

She moved on top of him. 'You'll have to leave soon...', she continued, followed by another kiss, while Gerd rolled left, going top.

For after they finished, Gerd got dressed and with another kiss, he left Tara at Biua's home, heading towards Veya's, where near the stairs was awaited by Biua herself. Who took him to the southern district, where he spent some good amounts of time glancing over pieces of armor, swords and sabers, while purchasing the required gear. As then both advanced northeast...

As close to noon, the witcher Gerd, following behind Galodo, left the town through the eastern gate, on horseback, accompanied or escorted, by Biua and Nerva.

'Witcher.', Biua said as they stopped after passing the stables outside the gates. 'Here...', she continued, throwing a pouch toward him. 'Veya wanted to reward you for the help you provided on our way here. I contributed as well. Tara too. It ought to prove useful, if you pass through a village or town.'.

'Thanks.', Gerd replied opening the pouch, allowing one coin in the shape of a rhomb, to fall in his palm.

'It's elven. They are quite rare outside of these mountains. One is more than enough to pay for supplies, horses or equipment.', Biua said. 'Keep them close. Away from him.', she added shifting her gaze toward Galodo. 'Whatever, edge- of this land you'll reach in search for the boy...Remember, that the east is most savage than all the others. And, if your search won't take you that way, it doesn't mean you shouldn't keep your guard up.'.

'Don't take it as an insult. But, do we even know the boy's still alive ?', Gerd asked looking at the Norhian warrior, as she turned to Biua for a moment.

'We would've known.', Nerva answered, certain, and with a tone that would leave one with little courage to make another inquiry. But not him...

'Alright.', he replied, placing the elven coin he had in his palm, back inside the pouch. 'What do you mean by, 'We would've known.' ?'.

Nerva's face slightly frowned, while Biua replied with a slight nod, and advanced toward Gerd with the intent to answer his question. 'One of their priestesses said so.', she said stopping near him. 'Quit being an idiot. As you were told by Veya before leaving, the Norhi tribe, wasn't and still isn't keen to share with us every detail. We- You, must make do, with what you have.'.

'Well, what I have, is as close as to having nothing at all.'.

'As a witcher, you must know, a couple of ways you could find a missing person...'.

'Mhm...', the witcher murmured. 'A few. But...!'

'Then-', Biua attempted to reply, before being interrupted by Galodo.

'Not to disturb your conversation. But, I couldn't help but overhear what you two were saying. As it happens, I might know someone that could help.'

'Good.', she said, looking at the mercenary. 'Here I was, thinking you'd use this, as a mean to escape the death sentence given by The Elders.', she continued, staring down Galodo. 'If so, it seems like you two have found a lead.', she said, making a half turn, towards the gate. 'Shouldn't waste daylight, should you ? Travel safe.'

After finishing up the discussion regarding details of the quest, Galodo had been sent to complete. Both Gerd and the mercenary left the town of Aeldúrr, and ventured northeast, toward the mountains, where as Galodo said, he knew a certain someone, that could help them have a chance at completing a task that at the time, seemed close to impossible. Curious, yet determined to complete this task, Gerd agreed to follow this lead. Which was their only and best lead, thus far...

After their departure from the town's eastern gate, Gerd continued to ride behind Galodo, until they reached the small farming village, east of Aeldurr, where he increased his pace and slowed down on his left side. 'Care to tell me where we're heading towards ?'.

'See those mounts to the east ?', Galodo said pointing toward a chain of green hills and barren mountains. 'That's where...!'

Looking toward the mountain peaks, some covered in snow, others piercing the clouds, Gerd remained silent, and vigilant. For this early in their journey to find the missing Norhi child, uncertainty, was plenty. Though, Galodo seemed fine, calm, somewhere in his being he must've been restless, perhaps even a slight crumb of rage and frustration. Because, after all, his days were numbered, his time further limited than before, was tied to the duration of his redeeming task to find the child.

Ahead, the stone bridge over the Naa'l appeared in sight, and beyond it, the eastern bank of the great river. And as far as Gerd was concerned, beyond that bridge, laid shaped into the green hill slopes, forests and valleys, the unknown.

However, this unknown, was relative.

A couple of hours passed, accompanied by silence, and by the sun's slow course west, that alike the two displeased partners, nonetheless, yielded progress toward their goal.

True. It did so, similar to the two foreigners traveling together, with regard to no unique end, through no unusual or unseen ways. No. It did so, with banal, old fashioned methods, forced upon it, burnt and beaten into it's being, casted as a prison of sorts. Bound by laws it cannot escape, same as all other bodies present on the vast and infinite realm, along with all the parasites, feeding and living of of it's precious glow. Doomed, caged, by a godly like force that enslaves everything. To which nothing is immortal and infinite, itself being tormented by

the same curse with which it enslaves all there is. Dreading, the moments when it's roaring flames shall extinguish, when every single source of energy it can burn and harness runs dry. As then all it's beloved heat, dissipates into an endless sea of darkness, illuminated by others alike, lost at sea, yet, unobservant of it's passing. Awaiting a similar, or a rather more aggressive demise. Witnessing, helplessly, the strength which forsakes it's once fervent body, leaving it to collapse, to grow cold. To sink into a mere memory, of it's long passed glory, until it completely fades away, leaving behind a mere beam of light, a canvas of the past, a traveler, a fragrant, a ghost. Kept as a mere morbid trophy, by the infamous, merciless, and genuine deity, Time...

'So... How did you come across this someone, whom, you say is able to aid us ?', asked Gerd, as both he and Galodo, began to ascend one of the hills, as they followed a tight path through a forested mountain pass.

The mercenary gave a slight pull of the reins, slowing his pace, and while keeping his eyes forward he replied. 'I sought help a couple years ago. After half a year spent scouring the northern and southern lands, I found that none could nor wanted to help me. Thus, I've ventured all the way here, from Kovir, to the far east of the Blue Mountains...And one day, I came across a tribeless woman, and she steered me towards those hills. Saying I'll find what I seek here.'

'Did you ?'.

'In a way.'

'That doesn't answer my question...'

'It wasn't meant to.', Galodo replied, setting his eyes onto the woods that had risen from beyond the hill's hump.

'Listen. If you want me to help, I have to know. You're never going to find-'.

'You think I don't know how difficult this is ? How poor my chances are ?', he replied, turning to Gerd. 'I do know.'

'Well, I'm glad you do.', Gerd replied with a cutting tone. 'Yet, as I recall, I didn't ask whether you grasp the difficulty of your task or not. I asked for-'.

'I know what you asked.', he interrupted slightly annoyed, then, with a sigh he continued. 'As I said, we'll find what we seek past these hills into the mountains. Beneath the northeastern peaks, there's a forest, and within it, a glade. A witch lives there, she might help us.'

'A witch... She might you say ?', asked Gerd, doubtful. 'How so ?'.

'She's rather private. Solitary. Usually, steers clear of folk, human or non-human, and their affairs. Even so, she helped me then. And she might be able to help me now as well...'

'Did you ask her why did she do it ?'

'I didn't.'

'Alright. What did she ask for in return ?'.

'Nothing. She asked for nothing.'

'Odd, as far as such things go...'

'Meaning ?'

'There had to be a price...As far as I know, being gratuitous, isn't one of their qualities. When I asked if you found what you sought, what did you mean by 'in a way' ?'.

'That she did help me. And I found what I sought.'

'You are awfully private about it...'

'It has no importance to you.'

'I hope it doesn't...But just for the sake of conversation, what if it does ?'.

'It'll be nothing that would concern you or me at the moment, nor have any repercussions on our current task. So, quit it. I'd rather have silence.'

'Fortunately, you don't need to wait long for it. Death more then often tends to offer the silence you so dearly seek...', Gerd said with a mocking tone, awaiting Galodo's response, until he heard the sound of trees breaking from his left. As the mercenary shot an arrow from his crossbow which passed by the bridge of Gerd's nose and stopped into one of the closest trees, where an ever growing sound of rustled trees seemed to come from, rapidly. Seeing that Galodo reacted so promptly, and looked like he knew what was about to jump them from the trees, Gerd turned towards him.

'Run !', the mercenary cried, before shaking the horse's reins, galloping ahead.

As from the trees a rock the size of a cart's wheel flew out, grazing a few of the trees which changed it's trajectory, as the boulder missed the witcher's head by about a hand's length, startling his horse. As if one warning hadn't been enough, another flew out of the woods, breaking off as it slammed against a tree into tinier pieces, one of which scraped the neck of Gerd's horse, which in turn bucked the witcher, and almost hoofed him in the head if he hadn't rolled left, from where he quickly casted Axii to calm the horse.

All the while Galodo had made a run for it, and disappeared beyond the hump of the hill, as from the woods the rock throwing culprit showed up, accompanied by a roar. 'Humansess- Pass not through h-here ! This Nabb's forrest. This Nabb's pass. If you wants pass- F-Fee must pay ! Orr Nab's mash trrrespasser with big rroock ! So ?!', the giant rock thrower said, rather screamed at the witcher, while stepping onto the road. 'What be, eh ?!'

Past Acquaintances

.XXX. Past Acquaintances.

As he rose from the ground with a couple of inaudible grunts, his eyes slid to the right, and locked onto Galodo's tracks, which led uphill...

'So ?', Nabb asked with a grunt, all the while the witcher stood up, more concerned about his partner's whereabouts and his horse's condition, than the troll in front of him. 'H-human has no t-tongue ? You alike the eunuch ?'.

'What ?', Gerd replied, as he laid his eyes on the troll.

'Nabb meet toongue-tied mann once. Looong ago. He hadd friend with. Friend said he a eunuch.', Nabb answered, scratching his chest. 'But you speaks. So ?'.

'What's the fee ?', Gerd asked petting his horse's back. 'It's alright...', he continued, calming his horse.

'You can give Nabb the horsie...', the troll replied.

'Are you going to eat it ?', Gerd asked turning to Nabb.

'Mhm.', Nabb murmured. 'What else it good for ? I cannot ride it.'.

'I need the horse. Choose something else.', Gerd said, stepping towards the troll.

'Hmm...Sharpy sticks !', Nabb responded with excitement.

'No. I need my swords too.'.

'Humannses always haggle !', Nabb grunted, with a thump of his left foot. 'You needs carriages. You needs boots. You need sharpy sticks. You needs wooden leg and pretty rocks. You needs horsie. You needs hats. Humanses greedy ! But ! Greedy no more after Nabb mash puny humanses with rroock ! Then Nabb takes whatever Nabb wants !'.

'What did the eunuch and his friend give you ?', Gerd asked calmly.

'Hmm. Nothing. Friend haggle not, eunuch haggle not, he not tongue had, and was poor like Nabb. Nabb let 'em go.', the troll responded. 'But you things has. And you greedy. Nabb gives rroock to greedy humanses !'.

'There must be something else I can offer. Think.', Gerd replied, approaching Nabb.

'Your f-frriend's horsie !', the troll said, with a snicker, proud of his resolve. 'Nabb saw how frriend left you beehind...!'

'He did...!', Gerd began, looking around. 'But you see, if I give you his horse, he'll have to ride with me.'

'Ride with ? Why ?! He leave you behind. So, he gets rroock !'.

'No need for stoning.'

'Why not ?!', the troll scoffed. 'You dumbhead !?'

Gerd chuckled. 'I might be. But, for now I have to find him...'

'Not worry 'bout that.', Nabb said, as he picked up a few of his rocks. 'Nabb, has friends too.'

'Meaning ?'.

'Nabb's friends will catch yours.', Nabb responded, as he finished up collecting his rocks. 'Follow.'

'Will they kill him ?', asked Gerd as he reached for his horse's reins.

The troll shook his head. 'Nabb does the killin', friends collect.'

'Collect what ?'.

'The humanses that escape Nabb's rroocks.', the troll replied as both he and Gerd, left the side of the woods. 'Shame. Your friend had pretty horsie. Nabb likes black horsies.'

'You always eat them ?', Gerd asked following behind Nabb.

'Not always. Nabb and friends, has horsies back at camp...', Nabb began, snorting. 'It's food Nabb has not...Nabb, must eat many things in one day. Nabb always hungry...Cannot eat horsies from camp, so...'

'You look for horses on the road...', Gerd added, leading his steed through the woods. 'You ever tried hunting ?'.

'Sometimes. Bunnies to quick for Nabb. But, Nabb can kill boars and deer with rroocks.'

Gerd chuckled. 'I guess there isn't much left of them after ?', he asked, while Nabb nodded sadly. 'There are plenty of deer tracks around here. I could hunt some for you. And we could call it as payment of the fee you requested.', Gerd replied, while Nabb placed his rocks on the ground, then sat near them.

'Alright. But, horsie stays with Nabb.', the troll began snorting. 'Nabb need two deer. Nabb gives you one deer leg.', the troll resumed, while Gerd tied his horse's reins to a tree near Nabb. 'Nice horsie...', he continued, trying to pat the horse's muzzle.

'I won't take long...', Gerd began, stepping away from his steed. 'Don't eat my horse.'

'Nabb won't eat horsie. Nabb, promiseses.'

'Good.', the witcher said, then turned away and left to look for a fresh set of deer tracks. 'I won't be long...'.

The storm which the witcher harbored within himself, hasn't calmed. Nor could he, with all his strength succeed in ignoring it. For it seemed that not even Kaela's words could calm it, no matter of how much she tried, or wished that she could do so.

'You're finally awake...', Kaela said, as Gerd let out a few grunts while turning on his back. 'How are you ? How's your head ?'.

'I'm fine. How is she ?', Gerd asked, checking the condition of his chest wounds, while standing on the bed's side.

'She managed to fall asleep not long ago. But, she barely ate anything...', Kaela murmured, laying naked next to the tub, on a walnut settee with her nose among the pages of a prominent book.

'She needs time, care and love...', Gerd added. 'But, she doesn't have anyone left to offer her those things anymore. All thanks to me.'.

'You could take care of her-', Kaela began before being cut short, as she placed the book she previously perused upon, down on a table to her right.

'Don't be ridiculous.', Gerd muttered. 'I cannot. She wasn't able to even look at me when we spoke. I am supposed to return her to her father, which I killed, because I chose to. Because, I know it's easier to extract the information I need from a dying man, than to convince one that I am trustworthy.', he continued, raising from the bed and walking towards a table at the center of the tent. From where he picked a tankard and drank. 'I could take her to Novigrad. I know several people that could offer her a good life, and the means for her to have such a life for herself later. I cannot offer her such things, Kaela. All I can give to her, is more of the same...Nothing more.'.

'I- don't understand how you can utter such absurdity. For it is so untrue.', she replied standing up, then scoffed. 'Was your kind really forcefully indoctrinated into believing that you are all emotionless monsters ? And that besides the sole purpose you were made for, you have nothing else to offer ? Because I know you don't believe in it.'.

'I have to believe in something.', he added, leaned over the table. 'I am a witcher. I kill for gold. Monsters, humans, matters less. As long as they pay me in gold.'.

'Gerd.', she replied softly, as she stopped near him. 'You know what I am. So, tell me, am I supposed to believe what the world says about my kind as well ? Just because I have to believe in something ? While there's plenty of proof pointing otherwise ? No, I do not. And nor should you...', she continued, touching his shoulder. 'We are much more, than what the world states we are.'.

Gerd scoffed. 'We are not.', then he paused for a few moments. 'We are simple. As I don't belong in their world, besides the times when I'm needed. And I don't even want to. So, I'm

not going to try to pretend to be something that I cannot become. I'm a witcher. I cannot just set aside or forget what I am, and be a parent. Nor could I hope being one, no matter of how much she needs a caregiver.', he resumed, then turned around to face Kaela. 'I know this must disappoint you. But, I cannot. Why should I deprive her of choice, and ruin even more of her life by taking her with me ? When there are people, who can offer her so much more than I can. I don't know why you can know every thought that goes through my head, but you're unable to see it...', he continued, placing his right hand on Kaela's cheek. 'Life is simple. You are born, you live, then you die. We complicate it. Love complicates it, along with fear, and greed. There's no reason for me to drag her along with me. On a path covered in blood and layered with corpses. I made no promise to anyone. Nor was she promised to me.'. He then kissed Kaela's forehead and walked towards the bed from where he picked his trousers and shirt.

She remained still and silent, for a good amount of time. As she probably, understood the source of Gerd's words. Or perhaps she didn't and tried to make sense of nonsense. Whatever it was, she did try to make sense of it. As she knew one of them was due to his nature, and another, his concerns regarding the wellbeing of Elia. As through all his stubbornness, he did make a valid point. That witchers are not caretakers, as their purpose is to be a monster slayer. Were they to assume such a role, the sole purpose for which they were made would become obsolete. As then, she recalled a quote she had found among Gerd's thoughts. 'For if a sword could begin to ponder about becoming a stick, it would loose it's sharpness.'. If it was true, or not, she couldn't tell. As she sensed in his previous words, both fear and contentment. Kindness, selflessness, and selfishness. Making the result of his decision to seem right, for he knew it's difficulty, and it's consequences. She then softly sighed, while turning around towards the witcher. 'Where are you going ?', she asked approaching, while he was getting dressed.

'To look for work.', he answered putting his frayed jacket on.

'You don't have to leave-', she said, before being interrupted.

'I do.', he promptly replied, fitting his gauntlets. 'It's best that I get as far as possible from the city. You and your people, might want to consider leaving as well. Find a new place the set camp. If you decide to, I'd urge you to do it today. That is, if you don't want soldiers to show up here come morning.'.

'-And you didn't plan on staying anyway...!', Kaela added with a murmur, then sighed. 'Where will you go ?'.

'Northeast. There might be some witcher work that way.', he answered, buttoning his jacket. 'Promise me you'll look out for her. I'll come back in a couple of days. I'll take her to the city then.'. His eyes then met Kaela's. He did not approach her, as he just gazed into her eyes for a few moments, then blinked. 'When I return, I'll pass by the elven ruins of Nyr Saeth...', he resumed, then turned and left towards the tent's doorway.

Afterwards, with a nod, he picked his swords and crossbow from a table close to the tent's entrance, and then, he walked out.

As Galodo passed the hump of the hill, he looked back, expecting to see the witcher riding behind. But, he saw no such thing. For all he heard was the loud neigh of Gerd's horse followed by a few thumps and a growl. While on the road ahead of him, two bulky men appeared from the left side of the woods. 'Voe'rle !', spoke the one on the left. Bald or so it looked, as instead of hair his head was tattooed. Bulky and tall, wearing a ragged dark grey tunic and black loose trousers, boots of the same color, tied by two buckles near the top half. And besides the hunting knife which he wore on his belt, he had no other weapon. And as for the one next to him, he was almost as tall, fair haired, with a light beard. He wore a beige shirt, and washed up green trousers. Grinning as he aimed his crossbow in the direction of the mercenary.

'Get off your horse, mate.', the one on the right added. 'Magnar. What's with the Elder Speech ? Eh ? Don't you recognize this cunt ?', he continued with a snicker aimed towards his mate. All the while the other, measured the mercenary, head to toe, and after a short couple of moments he responded with a snort and a spat.

To Galodo's surprise and the poor luck thus far, he did recognized the men in front of him, by the thick accent and then their distinctive looks.

'I fuckin' do !', the one on the left replied laughing, patting his partner's shoulder. 'How's it goin' ? What's your koviri arse doin' back here, eh ?', the man continued, approaching Galodo. 'I ask, 'cause me an me mate here thought you'd get as much distance 'tween you and the Thyr's as one could. Hell, I wagered you had gone beyond The Great Sea. What, did they finally get you ? If so...How come, you aren't dangling by their pretty bridge ? Eh ?', the man said, as he came as close to Galodo, that he could tell if whether, Magnar, still had his back teeth or not.

The mercenary awkwardly smiled, looking away. 'Luck, I guess...', he replied laying his eyes on Magnar.

Magnar frowned, then chuckled, as he tilted his head towards his partner. 'Luck, eh ?', he asked taking a few steps back. 'As I recall, all your luck ran out after that last job you pulled...', he continued, patting the neck of Galodo's mare. 'Along with whatever shred of amity you had left with those Thyr cunts...', he resumed, approaching. 'Whatever it is the reason you're still breathin', I am pretty sure it ain't 'cause of any luck...', Magnar paused for a few moments staring Galodo down. 'What it might be, is that debt you had. And for the reason you're here...Well, even though I don't know the exact spot, I'm pretty fuckin' sure you and that mangy prick Sartor, had a stash north of here...'.

Galodo replied with a short snicker. 'Is that why the two of you are here ?', he asked, then sighed. 'I emptied it of all the gold, then burnt the rest...'.

'You burnt all that fisstech ?', Magnar scoffed, baring his teeth. 'And all the pelts ?'.

'I did.'.

'Horseshit !', he snarled. 'The fisstech alone, would've sufficed enough, then some...To buy yourself the life of a fuckin' king and pay that bloody debt of yours.'.

Galodo chuckled. 'I see you don't recall, how we ended up with that much fisstech in the first place...',

'Does it matter ?'.

The mercenary nodded. 'Sartor and Zezka lifted it off a bunch of idiots that tried to sell it in Aedirn. Remember ? Saying that none would buy their high quality batch ? It might've been as pure as a priestess's twat, but were I or anyone else to seek a buyer in order to sell it...We would've received our payment in anything but coin. And if you still don't get it, that batch was stolen. None wanted to buy it because none desired to die for it...'.

Magnar started laughing, looking back at his pal. 'Am I supposed to trust you ?', he continued, whilst his right hand reached the hilt of the knife he kept on the belt. 'Cause I fuckin' don't. Now...You'll take me and Rocco to it. And if you speak the truth, and you really burnt it, I'll put this knife 'tween your ribs and toss you in that hole. But, if you didn't, and you lied... I'll take whatever's left in there, then I'll throw you in it, with your hands and legs tied and set it aflame, then I'll watch as you're burned alive.'.

Within the blink of Magnar's eyes, Galodo headbutted him, drawing his sabre from the back of his horse's saddle. As then he continued with a kick in the man's stomach that pushed him a few steps back, and followed with a slap on his mare's thigh. Which began to run ahead, towards the other's right side, with Galodo following behind, using his mare as cover. However, as he was about to leave the horse's back side, Magnar grabbed him from behind, locking his arm around Galodo's neck.

'You little bitch and your fuckin' tricks !', Magnar muttered as he squeezed his hold on the mercenary's neck. 'Catch that damned horse !', he continued, while the other followed after Galodo's mare. 'Stop squirming about ! Simmer down ! And do let go of that sabre, before I break your neck...'.

Galodo struggled for a couple of moments, then as his supply of air got thinner and thinner, he did let go of his sabre.

'There you go...', murmured Magnar, holding Galodo down, while the other did manage to catch up to the horse and bring it back. 'You know, mate. Your little idea might've worked, if you had fought Rocco instead...', he continued, watching as Rocco brought back the horse. 'He get's groggy if you smash him in the snout.', Magnar said, all the while Galodo was getting dizzy himself.

'Oy. Let' him out of that lock will you ? He'll pass out...', Rocco added, as he approached.

'Listen up, boss. I'll let go, if you promise to not give us more trouble. Deal ?', Magnar said, while Galodo nodded. 'Alright.', he resumed, then let go of the mercenary. Who, right after he was out of Magnar's hold, slid the tip of his right boot under the blade of his sabre and with a swift lift he hoisted it up into the grasp of his right hand. Managing a horizontal slash, which Magnar evaded.

'It was nice to see you again, boys. But, I'm afraid I got to go.', he said, taking a few steps towards the side of the road, then whistled. His mare raised on it's hind hooves managing to

pluck the reins from Rocco's grasp, all the while Galodo ran down the road, and met up with his mare ahead, jumping in the saddle.

Nor Magnar, nor Rocco gave chase. Nor did they look as if they wanted to. This particular escape, seemed to be rather too easy even to Galodo himself. Yet, as he set his eyes ahead, he managed to get a glimpse of why. As a sphere the size of a fist flew out of the woods, blowing up as it touched the ground in front of him. The horse let out a loud neigh, bucked the mercenary and then ran towards the side of the road, where it's stopped, startled.

Galodo fell with a thud, and a grunt, yet while his mare fled to the road's side, he managed to get up, only to be greeted by the stock of Rocco's crossbow slamming against his head.

'See ?', said the troll, playing with a boulder. 'Nabb likes this rroock moore, 'cause it dooesn't crumble. Nabb hate's crumbly rroocks. For they doon't mash as nicely.', he continued while the horse snorted. 'Ah !', Nabb sighed. 'Horsie Nabb's friend now. Nabb friend hurrts not.', Nabb uttered softly, while from the woods a faint sharp grunt could be perceived. 'Nabb doesn't like crumbly rroocks...Bum...Bum...Bum. 'Tween the woods Nabb finds them rroocks, they maash and squaash, they are biig colored alike aash, and smaash little humansess and all them greeedy foolks. Swoosh and Squuish. Nabb's likes rabbits, boars, deers too. Horsies taste good, but better friends to yooou...Bum...Bum...Bum.', Nabb mumbled melodiously, while rolling the bolder back and forth.

All the while from the woods, Gerd appeared, caring one deer on his right shoulder, while dragging another behind him. 'Got your deer.', he muttered, approaching.

'As promissessd...', the troll replied, as he felt he needed to. 'Nabb, did not eat horsie.'

While Gerd with a grunt tossed the deer carcass on the back of his horse. 'Good.'

'Now we go to camp.', the troll added as he rose up from the ground, then picked his boulder, while Gerd placed the other deer on his horse. 'Horsie, Nabb's friend too...'

'Great...', Gerd replied, taking the reins.

'You Nabb's friend too. What you called ?', Nabb said, walking alongside the witcher.

'Gerd.'

'Gerd, Nabb's friend.'

'Alright. The camp, is it far ?'.

The troll shook his head. 'No, closer now. Nabb, eager for new friend to meet other friends.'

'You don't say...'

'Your friend there too...', Nabb said, scratching his jaw. 'Nabb will make sure friends know, Gerd payed the fee.'

'Alright.', Gerd replied, as they advanced further into the thick woods following a beaten path, filled with all manner of thickets and shrubberies.

The Path: .II. A Rivian's Dilemma

.XXXI. The Path: .II. A Rivian's Dilemma.

'Doctor...I need some medicine !', screamed the patient, restless, eyes bloodshot, palms sweaty and lips dried up, tugging on the chain with which he was tied to the bed. 'I'm burning up ! Please !', he continued accompanied by the continuous rumble of the chain.

Near the room, or rather cell the patient was housed in, beyond the doctor's desk, on a creaking chair sat an individual, resting his legs onto the right side of the table, browsing through the old pages of an 8th century Medical Encyclopedia, he found on the bookshelf which stood, more of leaned on the wall behind, two steps left of a staircase leading to the basement. From which one could hear the clink of metallic objects being placed on a tray, followed by footsteps...

'Nurse !', a man's raspy muffled voice came from the basement, accompanied by approaching footsteps. 'Esther ! Dammit, you snoozing again ? Esther !', he continued, coming up the stairs. 'Esther ?'.

'She's not here.', the man sitting at the desk said, closing the book he perused upon, startling the doctor. 'I've sent her to the market.'.

'And you couldn't come down and tell me ?', the doctor said, after he took off his mask.

'You know I don't like the smell down there...!'

'What smell, alcohol ?'.

'Alcohol...!', the man replied with a chuckle, taking his feet off the desk, while placing the book on it. 'One would get quite drunk only on the fumes down there. You think I don't know why you wear the mask ?'.

'As I recall, you're no stranger to holding your booze.', the doctor said, grabbing a mug from the desk.

'True. However, it's quite early in the day...!', the man replied, while the doctor removed the lid off a bucket containing water. He filled the mug, then drank.

'Why are you here, Beau ?', he asked turning toward his pal, with a sigh, then refilled the mug.

'Have you managed, yet, to examine the corpse that the guards pulled out of the gutter this morning ?'.

'I did not. Been busy doing the autopsy on a priest. His wife was quite insistent upon it being done 'As quick as a Wink'...!'

'From what I recall, priests don't take wives...', the doctor's friend said, meticulously examining a small specimen of what he suspected to be a Zerrikanian scorpion. As it moved within a jar containing sand on the right side of the desk.

'Well, rumors say that this particular priest, frequented the inner circles of an esteemed governor back in Nilfgaard. And as for being a Priest, it seems to have been a mere title...'

'A priest from the motherland...', Beau sighed. 'What was he doing in Dorian ?'

'Nothing. He stopped here on his way to Vizima about two days ago. The wife mentioned he fell ill a few days after they passed over the Alba. His condition took a turn for the worst three days ago. Thus, they decided to stop here, in Dorian. They were lodged at the Plundered Inn. Where contrary to his wife's wish, he refused to be seen by a doctor, and requested that a witch or at least a herbalist be brought to him at once. Which by his wife's sayings, helped ease his ailment, but to no avail, as he passed away early this morning.', the doctor answered.

'Hmm. Your search for what caused his death, was it fascinating ?', Beau asked sarcastically, while the doctor grabbed a chair.

'Not in the beginning...', the doctor replied, aware of the sarcastic tone in his friend's inquiry. Yet, as he did enjoy to bore him with his dull life, he proceeded to explain. 'But it got a whole lot more intriguing, when I found that he had syphilis. Which adjoined by a preexisting precarious heart condition, led to death...', the doctor resumed, with a bored tone as if the highest point of his day, was this very conversation.

'Hmm. intriguing indeed...', Beau said, resting his head on the chair's backrest, as the doctor placed a chair on the other side of the table and took a seat. 'Which do you think had an affair, the priest or the priest's wife ?'

'Oh. We're doing this again ?', the doctor replied, taking a sip from the mug. 'The wife ?'

Beau chuckled. 'You know what I find interesting ?'.

'What ?', the doctor asked, leaning forward.

'You always choose the wife.'

'Title or not, he was a priest.'

'So ? I say he was a man, who still had his cock and balls. And as long as a man has those two, one should never be ruled out of being unfaithful. No matter his occupation, creed or race. For a man is a man.'

'Still, you generalize.'

'I might...'

'You really believe there's no man that would refrain himself from such temptations ? How about you and Edda ? Is she tempting you ?', the doctor asked with a subtle smile.

'Every day... And there are other kinds of temptations, besides sexual.'

'Doc- Doctor !', yelled the man behind bars. 'Give me some medicine ! I b-be-beg of you !'.

'I've been meaning to ask...Who's he ?', inquired Beau.

'You don't know ?', the doctor replied, slightly surprised, that Beau was just as uninformed as he was. 'Edda brought him in here. Tossed him in that cell, said I should give him another bucket of water at noon, then locked the door and left.'

'Well...That's one of many other things she tempts me with.', Beau said, raising from the chair, and looked at his friend who was awaiting further clarification. 'Curiosity.'

'Ah...', the doctor murmured.

'Have you looked at him ?', Beau asked approaching the cell, and chuckled. 'She didn't mention by any chance why she had him chained to the bed ?'.

'Not a word, I told you what she said...'

'And you didn't find it odd ?'.

'I learned not to ask or consider things when it comes to you two.'

'And I don't blame you...', Beau replied, carefully inspecting the man's condition. 'Judging by the excessive sweat, red eyes, soreness, scratching and Edda's involvement, I'd say he's ailment is withdrawal from fisstech.'

'That seems to be the case. But, why bring him here ?'.

'I can't be certain why, but if I am to guess, she did so to keep him sober.', Beau said, and with a click of his tongue he headed back to the desk. 'Nothing we can do. So, where were we ? Ah, temptation...How about you and Esther ?'.

The doctor snorted, as he was about to take another sip of water from the mug. 'Esther, my nurse ?', he asked then coughed.

'Yes. Do you know another with that name ?'.

'I know her since we were children. There's no temptation there...Just friendship and a healthy workplace etiquette.'

'Still. She is-'

'Quit it. I know what you're trying to do...!', the doctor interrupted, then gulped down the rest of the water he had left in his mug.

'I've no idea what you're talking about ?', Beau chuckled, as he hid his smirk beyond the book's cover.

'You're trying to tempt me. And, since you know me and Esther for almost as long as we know each other-'

'I would know, you used to fancy her...', Beau added, as his eyes moved to look beyond the book he hid his smirk beyond. 'Yes, I've noticed.', he continued, placing the book back on the desk. 'And I know that such emotions developed by someone during childhood don't just disappear...'

'I tend to forget of how you used to point that out to other folk, resulting in you being punched in the face...'

'Me too...', Beau replied with a sigh. 'So ?', he continued leaning forward.

'So what ?'

'Are you going to punch me in the face ?'

'No, sadly, I'm not going to punch you in the face.', he replied, as he stood up and fetched himself another mug of water.

'Good. You never knew how to properly punch anyways. I saved you from an embarrassment.'

'Very funny...', the doctor replied, dipping the mug into the bucket.

As then, the door violently opened, and just so it was slammed shut. 'The bastards, they're coming for you !', spoke Edda, breathing heavily, while Beau jumped on his feet.

'Where are they-', he inquired before being cut short.

'Beaumont J. Yaalvond du Vengerberg ! Step out of the household currently used as a temporary morgue at once ! Unarmed and with your hands up !', yelled a man, with a adenoidal voice as he was approaching the door, accompanied by the clinking of plates, the thud of his boots, and the loud knocks he gave to the door. 'We know you are in there. If your desire is not to be harmed, I advice you and your associates to step out at once ! Unarmed and with your hands up !'.

'Witcher.', called a wealthy merchant, covered by a crimson cloak which, would reveal from time to time a fancy doublet, a dark leather satchel, and a knife opposed to it.

'Yes ?', Gerd answered, turning his back as he sat on the driver's seat, leaning on the backrest, laying his eyes on the other individuals, women and children, sitting in the back of the wagon. 'What is it ?'

'Anything ahead ?', the merchant vaguely inquired.

Gerd chuckled. 'By anything you mean torched huts ? Severed heads laid into spikes on the road's side and bodies hanged by trees with signs nailed onto their torso, on which is written in blood, 'Traitor' ? Then no.'.

'What else ?', the individual asked, nervous, attempting to raise himself enough to see what laid ahead. 'This damned toddler like tantrum, affects all small businesses out of Temeria. And I had to leave mine- My shop ! My home and all my wares behind so that I wouldn't be flayed alive alike a witch, hanged as a thief or beaten alike a dog, by a kings army to which I've done close to naught, but being a fair and law obedient citizen. I've no taxes left unpaid, no fines, no complaints. I am a model citizen of both Temeria and Rivia, dammit ! All I've done wrong is that I was born in one country, and chose to live and do business in both !'.

'That's war, friend. Marginalizes foreigners, and colors enemies out of decent folk. A world turned onto itself.', spoke the gray haired temerian driver sitting next to the witcher. 'Wars aren't our fault, my friend, nor do we have a saying in such a matter. Nor are they fought to serve our wishes. But, those of the one wearing the crown...!'

'Well...The imbeciles wearing the crowns, are fighting a losing war. Lyria and Rivia, have naught to claim, but their freedom from being vassal states of Temeria. And to give ground for their skirmish, they concocted this drivel that the prices and taxes imposed by Temeria on temerian goods are far to high, as King Cedric and his collaborators swindling of the Rivian and Lyrian citizens must come to an abrupt end. Which a vast majority of folk took as fact and armed themselves with ignorance, howling from their bowels that this abuse has to end, proclaiming war to Temeria.', the merchant replied, as he almost turned red with fury, if he hadn't taken a sip from the bottle of vodka he kept near. 'And as for the taxes...The cretins raised them themselves overnight. Certain that it would hurt Temeria's export of goods. But it achieved no such thing. Only prove the Temerian's right, who at the beginning of this inane conflict, argued that Rivian and Lyrian mouths will be left unfed and along with the harsh winter we just had, will result in a widespread hunger. To which our revered monarchs scoffed, and deemed as condescending, erroneous gibberish. Stating that both Rivia and Lyria have more than enough to feed it's populace...', the merchant continued with a lengthy sigh, then remained silent as his voice was replaced by coughs and sniffs coming from behind, as well as by the rattling of the wagon, snorts of the horses, and the spat of the driver.

'There's nothing we can do, friend. But bear this plague they unleashed onto us.', the driver added, with a sniff, as his eyes of a bright blue surveyed the sides of the road.

'Alright...', the merchant muttered as if insulted. 'Are we to bear too, when the others alike Aedirn side with Temeria, and shut their borders and commerce to us ? What are we going to eat then ? Grass ? Sticks and bloody stones !?'

'Whatever we have, friend. Whatever we have...', the driver added calmly, whipping the horses, while the merchant fell on his bottom and leaned silently against the side of the wagon, taking another sip from the bottle.

All the while, Gerd watched the clearing in which the convoy of wagons was, narrow down, as the grass and bushes turned into small trees. While the front of the convoy had already entered the tall woods which covered the hills ahead.

'Seeing something out of the ordinary ?', asked the driver, clearing his throat.

'Nothing yet.', Gerd replied, tirelessly inspecting the road ahead. 'But, we are closing to the spot where the attacks happened...!'

'That we are...', the driver validated, then spat. 'Would it be to much perhaps, for an old man such as myself to hope that we'll make it to the other side of these woodlands safe and sound ?'.

'I'd suggest, not to-'.

While from the back of the wagon the merchant introduced himself in their discussion. 'Attacks ?! What attacks ?', he inquired, with a forced whisper.

The driver grunted, laying his eyes on the concerned merchant. 'Something, attacked two wagons as they passed through these woods, about four days ago. The damned thing went after the backside of the convoy as it passed the woods ahead. Sent one of the last two wagons tumbling and crash into the trees as if it was nothing, and flipped the other one ahead onto it's roof. By some luck only one man survived that ruckus, a driver, and one of his horses. Hence, why me and a couple of other drivers chipped in and hired the witcher.', the man answered, while the merchant gasped. 'I wouldn't worry if I were you-'.

'Wouldn't worry !', the merchant burst, compressing his lips. 'I- left Temeria out of fear to not be killed by soldiers, and you tell me not to worry- Witcher. Is there any chance we wouldn't be attacked ?'.

Gerd turned to the driver, who looked back at the merchant, then nodded. 'Depends. On whether it's hungry or not...'. He responded, while the merchant turned pale and took a jittery sip from his bottle. 'Then, there are the chances that it would attack this particular wagon...'.

'Whi-Which are ?', the merchant murmured.

'Not in our favor.'.

The merchant sighed. 'Pox...'.

'What's your name, friend ?', asked the driver, tilting his head towards the merchant. 'Mine's Merle, and the young witcher's called Gerd.'.

'Ziven...', the merchant replied. 'Pleased to make acquaintance. Even though, I would've preferred to do so in better circumstances.'.

'We all would, Ziven, we all would...', Merle replied, moving aside on the bench, making space in the middle. 'Sit with us...'.

The merchant nodded, grunting as he climbed over the improvised backrest, and sat on the bench, beside Merle and the witcher. 'So...', he said, making himself comfortable. 'Did anyone manage to get a glimpse of the attacker ?'.

'No.', Merle responded, compressing his lips. 'No one did. For none wanted to stop, slow down nor go back. Some, out of fear of whatever attacked the last two wagons. And as for the others, they were afraid that if the convoy would stop or go any slower, the soldiers will catch up.'.

'There were no attacks before ?'.

'I wouldn't know. And nor would any other man in this convoy. This route hasn't been traveled in the last couple of years. As most would choose the route south of here. The one that forks both north and south, as you head west from Scala. For no other reason, that during spring the rainfall makes this route awful to trek. Fortunately, we've had hardly any rain this year. Thus, this route is passable, and considering the reason we're here, I pray to the gods to spare us of bad weather for a few more days...'

The merchant sighed, and remained silent for a while, checking the sky for clouds. 'By the looks of it...', Ziven began, as he stared at the blue sky, devoid of any clouds. 'We just might.', he continued, lowering his eyes towards the wagons ahead. 'And with none of the wagons ahead attacked, this far...'

'Just so, nor did any of them, the last four times we've passed through here...', Merle added, then spat. 'You better not jinx us, Ziven.'. The merchant awkwardly grinned, squirming. 'Been with the witcher all those times too.'.

'Yet, there must be several theories regarding what had attacked the convoy ? Aren't there ?', the merchant asked, turning to Gerd, who didn't reply. 'There aren't ? Gods help us...'

'Besides the blood soaked ground, there wasn't much to identify it.', Gerd said, after a few moments. 'It could be anything with horns, claws or sharp teeth...', he continued as the wagon they were in, slowly began the descent of the hill's barren slope.

'Blo-Blood soaked ?', asked Ziven, still squirming about.

Merle nodded with a sigh. 'Me and a couple others returned here shortly after we reached the town of Hearton. We found nothing beside the wrecked wagons. No corpses, nor human or animal. Just blood...', Merle answered.

'What could've done that ?'.

'Only the gods know...', Merle answered, biting the left side of his lip. 'But, I wouldn't worry, my friend. We'll be the first to find out.', Merle joked, all the while Ziven turned pale.

'We ? Wait...There's only one more wagon behind us...', the merchant murmured, pale as snow. 'Witcher...', he continued, turning to Gerd. 'Could it be, that you believe- It attacked the backside of the convoy on purpose ? Do you ?'.

'Mhm.', murmured the witcher.

'Wha-What about the people-'.

'Well...', Merle interrupted, taking a long breath. 'We intended to leave with the wagon empty. But, as there were many people left...I-'.

'Decided to murder us all ? Men ? Women and children ? Myself included ?', Ziven uttered, then scoffed. 'You have no idea of what would attack us-'.

'The witcher-'.

'The witcher knows shite !', Ziven burst. 'He's only a few years older then the brats wrapped in their mothers arms, sitting behind us.', Ziven continued shaking his head with indignation. 'For if the beast attacks- He- We- We'll all perish alongside him-', the merchant attempted to continue his line of thoughts, before Merle interrupted.

'Listen !', Merle began nudging the merchant. 'You are not wrong. But you aren't right either. If you want to go back, I won't stop you. However, Ziven, we both know, you don't want to go back. So, if you don't want to go forward nor back, what's there left to do ? You cannot stay here. For if you would, you'd give in to fear. Fear of what ? Eh ? Death ? We all die at some point, my friend. Fearing the inevitable is ridiculous. At this moment, you either dare or give up. That's all the control you have. So ? What are you going to choose ?'.

It took the merchant a while to answer. 'I- don't want to go back, and I'm certain I don't want to remain here. You're right...', he sighed, staring at his boots. 'I am not used to this particular kind of daring. For I just don't want to perish in the middle of nowhere. With none of my kin knowing of how I died and by whose hand.'.

'So, you're family is in Rivia, then ?'.

'No...', the merchant puffed. 'Temeria. I've left my wife and children with my brother in law. Whom I instructed to take them to Dorian, where they'd have to wait out this ridiculous quarrel.', Ziven continued with a shivering groan.

'Then how come you're heading into Rivia ? Why didn't you go with them ?'.

'My sister.', Ziven answered with a sniff. 'She and her family live in Hearton. I just couldn't flee to Dorian, and let her and her family starve to death. For who knows how much this senseless schism is going to last...', he continued, as he raised his eyes from his boots, letting out a deep sigh. 'I mean, since a week ago, when both Rivia and Lyria sent troops beyond the Mahakam Mountains, to butcher and burn villages. Temeria didn't just pound their hinds, but has almost surrounded them, as Aedirn answered the call to arms, and while Sodden is still maintaining it's neutrality, and Angren stated that they don't want to be dragged in their conflict, I've little faith that Rivia and Lyria will call for a truce any time soon...!'

'They're stubborn.'.

'More foolish, than stubborn it seems. Setting off a damned war during spring, after the rough winter we just had...', Ziven scoffed. 'Heed my words, Merle. The temerians, they'll starve most of Rivia and Lyria to death...!'

As the convoy lazily advanced downhill, Merle and Ziven grew silent. All the while, Gerd, hadn't seen nor heard anything out of the ordinary. Nor did he hope to be able to, as he knew that if the monster would decide to attack their wagon or the one behind, he could do very little to prevent it. However, he was aware that his presence is not to prevent the attack, but rather make sure it won't happen again, for his job was to ensure the long term safety of this route. As to his surprise, the folk in the backside of the wagon, were rather calm, and the same could be said about the people in the wagon behind. For none left when Merle told them about why he and the witcher wanted the wagon to be empty, but argued that they cannot be left behind, to be beaten or killed by temerian soldiers, that they'd rather die trying

to flee, then waiting around. Yet, he didn't know whether their tranquility was because of his presence, or that they had so little hope for survival, if an attack were to happen, that they made peace with the possibility of dying.

'What else are you saying ?', Ziven asked, after a good amount of time spent in silence, as the wagon was almost at the bottom of the two hills.

'Not much.', Merle added.

'I for one, have a strange craving for a pint of beer...', Ziven began, clicking his tongue.

'Believe it or not, but there's some good ale in Hearton. Apparently, its flavour is unique, or so the tavern owners pride themselves over the famed recipe. Which is, as you would expect, a stubbornly kept family secret...', Ziven continued, all the while Gerd raised from the bench looking ahead.

Merle chuckled. 'Now that you mention, I wouldn't mind a pint myself...!'

'We've a problem.', Gerd said, turning to Merle.

'What ?'.

'There's a wagon ahead stranded on the right side of the road.'

'Dammit, we're supposed to be the last two...', Merle replied lifting himself up, to see what laid ahead. 'Dammit, it's Ismur.'

'The dwarf ?', Gerd asked, while Merle nodded. 'I'll go ahead and see if I can help.', the witcher continued, then jumped from the wagon.

While Gerd hurried towards it, from the dwarf's wagon, which used to be among the fourth or fifth in the front, from the side facing the woods, only swearing and curses could be heard, along with a couple of clangs. 'Fuckin' shite !', yelled the dwarf as he kicked the back wheel.

'Stop swearing and cursing' !', a woman wailed, climbing down from the wagon. 'What good's that gonna do ?'.

'Ah ! Shut it !', the dwarf replied, kicking the wheel again. 'Unless you aim to help me fix this damn thing...!'

'Why did you think I got out of the wagon for ?', the ginger haired woman asked, standing near the dwarf, who was trying to push the rear wheel back into place. 'For laughs and giggles ?'.

'Unless you can lift this piece of shite ! Laughs and giggles is all you're good for...', the dwarf replied, as he then noticed the witcher approach his wagon. 'Ah ! Gerd ! Praised be the sweet bosom of Melitele !', Ismur continued, as he was then swiftly nudged by the woman. 'What ?! Isn't that cunt the patroness of nature and love ? For the damned nature is what fucked us !'.

'How is it ?', asked Gerd, walking past the back of the wagon.

'Fuckin' stuck ! That's how...!', the dwarf responded, hitting the wheel with the side of his fist.

'Then we better fix it, before the last four wagons go past us...!'

The dwarf's thick brows frowned, settling over his wide opened eyes accompanied by a grunt, as he nimbly grabbed onto the wheel. 'Then fuckin' help me lift this hunk of shite !'.

With the help of the witcher, Ismur did manage to mend the rear wheel of his wagon, yet contrary to their hopes, they failed to do so just before the rear end of the convoy would catch up. Thus, by the time the reparations were done, the back of the convoy was almost disappearing beyond the thickets at the top of the hill. And as Gerd expected, Ismur wouldn't calm nor try to until they'd reach the back of the convoy. For by the time he was back aboard his wagon and fiercely whipped the horses, he had successfully cursed half of the gods in the northern pantheons.

'Shite !', the dwarf began, accompanied by the rattling of the wagon, leaned forward, watching as the rear of the convoy disappeared beyond the hump of the hill. 'At this rate, by the time we reach the top, we'll be fuckin' sledding down the other side !'.

'Then slow down !', the ginger haired woman yelled from the back of the wagon, with a couple of groans.

'We're barely moving ! If we go any slower, we'll be fuckin' still !'.

'Then don't go through all the wretched potholes !'.

'The whole fuckin' road is littered with cursed potholes !', the dwarf replied with a puff. 'Shut it !', he resumed, as the woman, aided by a rope attached to the side of the wagon, stopped behind Ismur.

'I remember telling you to quit talking to me like that in front of strangers !', the woman said with a hiss, slapping Ismur's shoulder. 'Is that the example you're trying to set ?', she continued while the dwarf replied with a murmur. 'If so, Ismur my dear, you're an ill-mannered little man. And I pity you for it...!', she added, as Ismur muttered something under his breath. 'So, witcher...', she said, with a poke to his upper arm. 'I've heard you were hired to slay the beast which attacked those wagons a few days ago.', she resumed, sitting in between Ismur and Gerd. 'Did you find anything ?'.

'Very little.', he answered, tilting his head her way, as her bright blue eyes absorbed his, with an intimidating efficiency. Then, she proceeded with a squint and softly puckered her rosy lips, as if she desired the young witcher's undivided attention. Which, she gained without much effort.

'Hmm...!', she murmured, then softly smiled. 'I'm Tasia, by the way.'.

'Gerd.'.

'I know-'.

'Leave him be, woman. He's to be vigilant, not distracted by the likes of you.', the dwarf said, a wee bit calmer as the road conditions got better, as they were ascending the hill. 'Just don't look her in the eyes, lad...', the dwarf continued, further cutting the growing tension between the two. 'For Tasia here, is a cruel woman.', the dwarf continued, as she nudged him.

'Cruel ?', Tasia scoffed.

'Aye.', the dwarf replied, scratching his auburn beard.

Tasia softly chuckled. 'Aren't you jealous, by any chance ?', she said, as Ismur gave an awkward smile and a giggle, while maintaining his eyes ahead. 'You're awfully simple to read. Even with all that fur covering your silly mug.', she continued, 'Besides, what exactly are you jealous for ? I'm not your wife nor your lover. For-'

'I fuckin' know what you do...!'

'And that's why I'm cruel ?!', Tasia asked, slapping Ismur's ear. 'That's how I make my coin, how I earn my living ! Blaming or shaming me for it is as if I would taunt you for being short.'

'Which you fuckin' do...!'

'Yet, I am merely teasing you.'

'And how is it the same ? I cannot will myself to be taller-', Ismur said as he was then interrupted by Tasia's scornful chuckle.

'And should I will myself to be what exactly ? A wife ? A mother ? A mere object, appreciated for two exact things, both related to each other ? A thing a man can shove his dick into whenever he wants ?'.

'Isn't that what-'

'No !', she promptly replied with a hiss. 'As I am no ones property. It baffles me that folk think a woman's purpose in life is to marry a dimwit, give birth to his children then take care of them. How's that not as degrading as what I do ? As in my opinion, it is the most demeaning thing a woman could choose to do, and all is because of love ? Fuck love ! And all who foolishly believe in it. For if that's the sole purpose a woman should live for, then...', she scoffed, while the dwarf fell silent. 'I'd rather not live at all.', she resumed, with a sigh. 'For Ismur, my dear, despite you're rough looks, you are indeed a sweet, good man. But, also a helpless fool...', she continued, with a gentle brush of her fingers to his cheek.

Ismur cleared his throat, then sniffed. 'Witcher...', the dwarf said, as his brows descended above his eyes, while a neigh was heard from ahead. 'Isn't that ashen horse, your mare ?'.

'It is.', Gerd replied.

'Then who's the rider ? And how come she didn't buck him yet ?'.

'Merle.', the witcher answered, as the temerian approached. 'That's Merle.'

'Witcher ! Ismur !', Merle shouted waving, as he stopped and awaited them on the right side of the road, then rode alongside them. 'Thank the gods you're fine ! We thought something else happened to you, after we lost sight of your wagon.', Merle resumed, with a cough, while laying his eyes on Gerd. 'Well...As the road ahead is still in good condition, the convoy made it out of the woods, and is almost in Hearton by now...'.

'So no attacks...'.

'No, we are fortunate.'.

'It seems so...'.

'You seem disappointed, lad ?', Ismur said with a chuckle, then spat. 'Is it so bad that the convoy wasn't attacked ? Perhaps, that damned thing fucked off somewhere else...'.

'I doubt it.', Gerd murmured. 'I've traveled this route almost five times already. And nothing happened then either. But, whatever attacked them then, will attack again.'.

'Hah ! I bet you're the only one that wants the convoy to be attacked. Don't fuss, just take it as it is, and lighten up. What's there to care about anyway ? They pay for your food and lodging. So lad, once we reach Hearton, get yourself something to drink and eat, then sleep till tomorrow. When, you'll have to trek this damned route again...'.

Gerd replied with a couple of nods, as he then set his eyes on Merle. 'By the way...', he said with a subtle sigh. 'How far are we going tomorrow ?'.

'Same as today.'.

'How many wagons ?'.

'Half.', Merle answered as Gerd remained silent, certainly due to the frustration his current contract caused him. For at the time he took the contract, which he expected to be but a brief detour on his journey to Beauclair, proved to be five dull days he spent mostly by sitting in a wagon.

'Why ? Are the others fleeing into Angren ?', the dwarf asked with a snicker, while Merle nodded. 'We should head back to Riedbrune as well...'.

'I guess...', Merle muttered, then spat. 'There's not much left we could help with, before the Temerian banners will flood the borders...'.

Although, the news regarding the convoy's uneventful journey back to Hearton had been welcomed by Gerd, whom, in the morning, before their departure, anticipated yet another monotonous trip. And at the same time, despised the following days, which he presumed to be just as damp and futile, at least as far as his trade was concerned. However, as they were passing through the woods at the top of the hill where the attacks happened, all of a sudden the witcher raised from the seat, staring intensely into the woods, and then jumped from the wagon. 'Do not stop !', he yelled as he jumped. Alerted by the increased trembling of his medallion, he unsheathed his silver sword. As from the woods, a gush of wind accompanied

by the croaking of crows followed by a slim figure. It's torso made of contorted wood with roots extending outwards from within it's chest. It's shoulders layered with moss, and mushrooms. Arms and legs of a rough grey and musky bark, cracked and rugged, worn by the wind and rain. It's neck composed of roots, some alike sinews, while his head, but a deer's skull, with sharp antlers the size of one's arm. Revealing itself from amidst the woods, as if its his meeting with the witcher had been planned, and very much awaited.

'Finally...!', Gerd grinned, as he watched the beast steadily reach the side of the woods raising it's arm, as slim as the branch of a tree, with sharpened claws, turning white towards the tips. Then, with a growl and the croaking of the crows, it vanished into the woods, as if it invited the witcher to enter its domain.

'Witcher !', Merle shouted, from a few meters away, as further down the hill, was Ismur's wagon.

'Leave my mare and go !', Gerd replied, approaching the side of the woods, while Merle climbed down from Yyn's saddle, petting her neck, and with a bow of his head, he quickly left towards Ismur's wagon.

All the while, Gerd further advanced through the forest. Which, as he proceeded deeper within became denser and taller, its age nearing half a century. Whereas, on some trees he noticed etchings, lines and scratches, some new, others old. The freshest, made by the master of those woods, as if it left them to guide the witcher towards its lair. For with each step he made, following the marks left by the spriggan, the air felt heavier. The silence ever deeper. Ever confusing. Almost deafening. For, after a long time spent in almost complete silence, Gerd, reached a glade, in the shape of a circle, brimming with stumps of great trees. Which upheld by roots and moss, corpses. Human and non-human, several encased within the boles of the trees, while the animal remains were laid on the ground, covered with moss and roots, in between the others. All posed alike statues, while from their corpses and the roots holding them, branches extended outwards.

As Gerd inspected the corpses, he discerned that some had been taken alive, and had been strangled by the roots. Several died due to the pain their bodies were positioned into, as most were twisted and curled in horrid positions. Others, had roots growing through their bellies, chest, neck, eyes and ears. However, he later deduced due to the paleness of their skin, that those were old, most coated in layers of tree sap. Some, still showcasing the pain and terror which they experienced...

And as for the fresh ones. They were impaled, or held by the blood soaked branches of a dead tree, sitting in the middle of the glade, beneath which was the spriggan's totem.

'This is no ordinary leshen...', Gerd murmured, as he carefully advanced towards its totem. Which was surrounded by about a dozen of axes, knives, swords and crosscut saws, all drenched in blood, both human and animal. His sole source of information, was the many bestiaries he read as a pupil, and the stories told by Mousar, regarding beasts a witcher ought to be always mindful of. As among the spotted wights, basilisks and kikimora, had been the Ancient Spriggans, Leshens, spirits of the forests. Thus, by the words of Mousar, the most effective defense and offence against one is endless patience and vigilance, along with proper

discipline of the mind and body, signs and potions. Yet, even a witcher with a mastery over those, must be ever so alert, for these creatures are highly intelligent, and powerful.

Thus, with a snort, he took out two potion vials from his belt, pulled their corks out, and gulped their contents one after the other, as he then continued with a few grunts and a long exhale. All the while his medallion's trembling intensified, as from behind the tree in the middle of the glade, the master of the forest appeared, accompanied by a deep growl and the cracking of the trees and roots, while Gerd already had taken his stance, holding his sword high with both hands, pointed towards the leshen, letting out a couple of slow breaths.

'So...!', Gerd began with a shudder, caused by the toxicity of the potions he just took. 'Folk cut down your trees...!', the witcher continued, while the leshen let out a deep guttural sound, then tilted its head to the tree behind, along with a wave of its right arm. 'That's them?', he asked with a grunt, as the leshen extended its left arm outwards, then moved it to the right. 'All of them...!', Gerd resumed with a sigh. As then, the forest grew silent once again, all the while Gerd felt a burning stare coming from the leshen and at the same time he sensed a couple of weak vibrations beneath his feet. For a split of a second later, he dodged right, as roots burst out of the ground, and shot an arrow from his crossbow, aimed toward the leshen's chest, which stopped in the branches the leshen raised from beneath the earth. Then with a growl, it disappeared. Leaving Gerd to move in a circle, clueless, of where it shall show up again. While the air within the glade grew heavier, as if the trees turned it thinner and thinner. At the same time the metallic scent of blood raised from the ground beneath his feet covered with moss. For then, as he made a half turn, the leshen revealed itself, right in front of the witcher, striking him with the back of its arm right into the chest, throwing Gerd into one of the corpses held by roots behind, which as soon as he struck against, attempted to wrap themselves around his left forearm. Which he quickly pulled away from their grasp and rolled right, as the leshen attempted a diagonal slash, which to Gerd's surprise was followed by another of its other hand, that he strived to deflect with his sword and turn the momentum given into a diagonal slash himself. Yet, contrary to his strategy, he did not appreciate the distance from the closest tree, nor did he know how much the roots could extend outwards. Thus, he only noticed them with the corner of his right eye, as he then felt the need to roll the opposite way, which meant he would be slashed by the leshen's clawed left arm. Therefore, he promptly casted Igni, towards the leshen, and rolled left nonetheless, expecting it to back away. It didn't.

The tips of its claws, white as bone, slashed Gerd's right arm and shoulder, breaking the chainmail and the plates, sinking into the flesh, tearing through it, with a screech. And as he regained his balance, as the pain began to sink in, as the blood started to trickle down his forearm, hand and break off from the sides of his fingers, down the grip of his silver sword, and then drip on the moss covered ground. He let out a grunt, tightening his hold onto the sword's handle, whilst with the grinding of his teeth he raised the blade, as he placed his other hand on it. And proceeded to cast Aard, which managed to push the leshen backwards, followed by a horizontal slash, another cast of Igni, which this time didn't fail, a half turn and a diagonal slash, succeeded by a lunge which was stopped by the leshen with a shield composed of several roots that it manage to pluck from the earth right before the tip of the blade would sink into its torso. All of which, had rendered the right arm of the leshen useless, held in place only by a piece of bark, whilst its chest lost most of the mushrooms and moss covering it, most still aflame.

As then, covered by its shield of roots, it vanished once again, leaving Gerd to guess where it'll strike this time. The back, he guessed, turning, as the leshen summoned a couple of roots to impale the witcher alike the men and women in the tree branches, but Gerd rolled left, casting Aard, which unsuccessfully didn't nudge the leshen, whose roots moved towards the witcher, with haste. Which Gerd managed to out run, as he charged towards the leshen, whose claws slashed diagonally missing Gerd's head by a few fingers, who dodged left, and cut the legs of the leshen clean off, causing it to fall on it's back. For Gerd proceeded, and successfully stabbed it in the skull, then swiftly turned and casted Quen, as he was struck by the roots.

As his shield exploded, he was hurled head first into a stump a mere few steps away, while the leshen released a loud deep growl, which shook the nearby trees...

What followed had been dreams. In them he made it out of the woods, despite the pain in his back, head, right arm and chest. He managed to reach Yyn, and even climbed in the saddle, and then the dream ended, and then played again from the beginning. As then besides the dream he felt thirst, a pulsating pain in his right arm, head, and chest, along with coldness, shivers and a dry throat a few thuds and then warmth.

'He smacked his noggin pretty nicely, I see...!', said a man with a raspy voice, which Gerd believed to belong to the dwarf, Ismur.

'Shut up !', a woman's gentle voice followed, along with the drips of water as she wringed a piece of cloth, then placed it on his forehead. The cloth, it was cold, refreshing. 'He's waking up...!', she continued, with a puff.

'Don't move, friend.', another said, it was Merle.

As then Gerd sluggishly opened his eyes accompanied by a couple of grunts. 'Where am I ?'.

'Hearton.', another man said with a modulated voice, it was Ziven. 'You don't remember anything, do you ?', Ziven added as the witcher laid his eyes on the merchant.

'How did I get here ?', Gerd inquired, licking his dried lips.

'On the back of your mare, lad. Half dead...!', Ismur answered.

'Do you need water ?', the woman with a gentle voice asked, it was Tasia's. Gerd softly nodded, as she handed him a tankard filled with water.

'I don't even remember getting out of the woods...!', he murmured lazily laying his eyes on the people within the room, of what he could perceive thus far to be his room at the Inn. Considering the quality of his sight, which was really poor, however it was getting less foggy.

'Well...!', Merle began, with a puff. 'You managed to, and that's all that matters.'.

'Sides, you slayed that fuckin' beast too...', Ismur continued, then drank from a tankard he held in his right hand. 'Brought its damned head and all. What ? I thought he wanted to know that too.'

'He needs to rest. Get out ! All of you !', Tasia said, as she replaced the piece of cloth she previously placed on his forehead with another, then raised from the stool she sat on showing the others out, towards the door right of the room, then as all besides her got out, she looked towards the corner of the room, next to the door, right of Gerd. A side to which his neck pain didn't allow him to look. 'You too !', she said, quite insistent.

'No.', another woman replied, stepping towards the bed's end. 'Now that he's awake. I need to talk to him.'

Tasia scoffed. 'So be it.', she said, then left the room, closing the door. While the other woman walked to the left side of his bed, sitting on the stool.

'Witcher...', she said with a sniff, leaning towards him. 'I don't know if you remember me, but-'

'Edda.', he interrupted, then attempted to reach for the tankard containing water. 'What happened ?'.

She sighed. 'Let me...', she added, while helping Gerd quench his thirst, by bringing the tankard to his mouth. 'I need your help. Beau and I need your help...'

Snare for the Wind

.XXXII. Snare for the Wind.

Thus, Gerd headed north. On the road passing by the remains of the Kilkerinn Palace. A road that took him so far northeast of Novigrad, that if he would continue to ride two more days north, he'd reach the southern bank of the Duppa River. Therefore, after a two days ride, late in the afternoon, he deemed the distance he placed between himself and Novigrad, to be just far enough. And so, he made camp off the main road, into the woods. A short distance from a livestock village, recently known for lumber, by the name of Yeene...

'Her eyes were of a green alike spring's vibrant plains, and shined from amidst her locks of hair as black as the night. Her skin as white as fresh snow laid upon the frozen earth...', Kaela whispered, watching through a crack in the tent's canvas as Kairr alongside with others danced around the fire with Elia.

'What's that ?', Gerd asked, laying beside her on the bed.

'A tale Kairr and I heard a while back...', she replied standing on the side of the bed.

'What's it about ?', Gerd asked kissing her hand.

'In a recent reinterpretation, a maid...', Kaela softly began, shifting her gaze towards the witcher. 'Cursed to spend eternity as being young and beautiful, yet, blighted to never know nor feel true love. None of her lovers able to keep her. Forever bound to loneliness...', she continued, then laid down, resting her head on Gerd's upper abdomen.

'Kind, as far as such curses go. Sounds like a fairytale. Forever young and beautiful, yet unable to know nor feel true love.', he began, as Kaela softly chuckled. 'What's the catch ?'.

'None.', Kaela replied, turning her head his way. 'Though, I agree, it is not as bad, as far as curses go. And, unlike your presumption which is rather amusing, it is a fairytale.'

'Is there a knight in it too ?', Gerd asked mockingly.

'There are a couple. And none succeeded in trying to lift the curse.', she replied, running her fingers along Gerd's arm.

'Is there a particular reason you thought of it ?', he asked while playing with a few locks of Kaela's hair.

'Elia, among a few others...'

Gerd attempted to reply, yet he was cut short by Kaela. 'You must allow me to finish...', she said, kissing his chest. 'You see, I was about Elia's age when I first heard it. It was in the form

of a ballad, sang around the campfire, by a bard hailed Tértec, outside of Old Vizima.', she continued with a soft chuckle.

'Tértec...', Gerd softly spoke, staring at the tent's canvas roof as it was slowly waving. 'I've heard that name before. Wasn't he burnt on a stake, in Cidaris, over a ballad of his ?'".

'Not as far as I know. Where have you heard that ?'.

'A ballad...', Gerd answered, then attempted to recall the verse. '...'For a fist of gold', was the proud lord's behest. 'At long last, Sire.', had been Tértec's the bard retort, keen to keep his lord 'till dawn awake, Strummed his lute, and sang his best. Yet, come morn, both he and his lute had been burnt at the stake.'

Kaela reply had been a smile followed by a short laugh.

'He didn't ?', Gerd inquired, while Kaela was still amused.

'He did not.', she replied. 'He was murdered by humans, a week later on the road, after he sang his ballad about Anwen to us, near Vizima. He was an elf.'

Gerd murmured, 'Must've been another bard, by the name of Tértec then...'.

'I would think so.'

'Do resume your tale.'

'As you wish...', Kaela replied. 'Now, what I am about to tell you, is an adaptation of the ballad into a theater piece, Kairr and I, watched in Ellander.'

'Why is that ?', Gerd said, with a sneer.

'For I can only recite it, as singing has never been a talent of mine. Sadly, it was passed onto my brother. However, I'd rather prefer to avoid his sulking and craving over you. As I am sure you concur...'

'So be it. Pardon my intrusion.'

Kaela replied with a smile, as she then proceeded to tell the tale. 'Her mother was the youngest of five siblings. Three daughters and two sons, descendants of a noble family of warriors and merchants. The oldest son, followed in his father's footsteps, as a merchant. While the youngest, against his father's wishes, not only dreamt to, but trained and dedicated his early years entirely to become a knight, just alike his uncle and grandfather before him. An honorable servant to his people, in service of the king. Yet, one unfortunate day, while riding around the vast grounds of his father's estate, he fell off his horse, and broke his neck. The father cried, his brother and sisters wept. Yet, a mere week later, joy and happiness gripped the merchant's household, for his second oldest daughter had received a marriage proposal, from a venerable noble house. She was quickly wedded to the lord's eldest son. A handsome, fair haired young man, whom, eagerly awaited the moment where he'd leave his ancestral home and take residence, in one of his father's estates, which laid in the southern hills of Nazair. Both sworn to love each other to the last of their days.', Kaela continued, then

paused, while turning on her right side with a click of her tongue, as Gerd followed after. 'Must you always be the pessimist...', she sighed, smiling. 'Anyhow, a year later, she gave birth to a son, that she named after his fathers grandfather, Remion. A year after, a daughter. Anwen. Alas, their love for each other did not last 'till the end of their days. But, a mere couple of years. The kindness once expressed by her husband withered away as well. Cruelty and insults replaced it. Yet, she endured. Hoping throughout, that he would one day, come to his senses and behold the unyielding love she had for him. A few summers later, during an evening he spent mostly, by kissing countless bottles of wine. For the mere insolence that she possessed, to dare question his sobriety and advice him when and where he should sleep, he had her beaten and kicked her out of the house, to sleep with the hounds, as the whore that she is...'. Her voice softly began to fade away, echoes lingered, as the songs of wrens and robins replaced it, along with the rustle of the leaves, and the creaking of the woodland...

The early hours of that very morning had been colder than in previous days, for the wind started to howl not long before dawn. Still, about four hours after sunrise, it steered most of the clouds southeast, leaving place to the azure sky, populated here and there, by wispy clouds. It seemed more alike an autumn day, than late spring as the persistent wind continued until late in the afternoon.

And as Gerd was having a handful of bites from his dinner leftovers, rabbit, near what now was an extinguished camp fire, he decided to see if there wasn't any witcher work in Yeene. Thus, after he brushed his mare, Yyn, saddled her, with a deep breath of fresh air, he set out northeast, towards the village.

Yet as he followed the road, north towards the village, the scarce woods suddenly ended, as the road advanced into a valley, where the village was. Leaving place to hundreds of broken trees, plucked from the ground by what seemed to have been a fierce storm. While on the sides of the road, here and there, the eye would make out through the put down trees, and the surviving shrubs, guts, and animal carcasses, most torn to shreds, a handful few still recognizable, and all in origin, sheep. Further, downhill, the village began. Small huts, most wrecked to piles of broken wood, others left roofless, and others blown away as if they had been made out of nothing but sticks. The magnitude of the havoc seemed to extend through the village, then out and around, with the most severe vastness of the vandalism, stretching east. Where among what used to be a woodland shading a pond, was now a greenish mere, robbed bare of any shade.

However, the severity of the gale which had struck a village this far into the mainland, became clearer only as the witcher approached. For along the road, leading to the outskirts of the village, the animal carcasses began to give way to human corpses. Among the three cadavers present on the road, one had suffered a blow to the head, most likely by some kind of debris, which had struck the peasant in the back of the head, hard enough to visibly cave the skull. The other, a few steps away on the opposite side of the road, had a broken neck, as he was laid on his back, with the head propped up against the stump of a tree. While, the third, was nearly torn in half from the waist, his corpse impaled in the signpost near the village's wrecked gate. Whilst, beyond it, about a handful of injured folk. Men, women and children laid on the ground or leaned on whatever was left standing of the huts at the edge of the village. While past them, others were searching for survivors among the rubble, calling

names whilst sifting through the remains. And in between the name calling, groaning and whimpering, the cries of a boy were most dominant. Sitting on a bench outside of the collapsed walls of a hut, on the right side of the road, as to his left a leg was protruding out of the doorway, with none of the villagers giving him a second look. Of such nature were the events that unveiled all the while, Gerd, made his way through the remains of Yeene.

So, he wandered forward on the road, slightly inclined downhill, through the first two rows of huts at the edge of the village. Yet, as he faintly glanced over the piles of broken beams and planks, he set his eyes ahead, as from beyond the run down western side of the village, with about a dozen huts reduced to rubble, along with the stables, the rest of Yeene, more accurately, the center of the village rose up. Oddly, it was almost untouched by whatever laid havoc through the western part of the village. True, at first glance, most of the huts and houses left standing there, were made of stone. Yet, beyond them, on the opposite side of the village, almost none of the peasant homes seemed to be razed to the ground, while the woodland beyond, had been put down, broken, trunks flung over the road, and less than a handful, happened to fall on top of the huts at the very outskirts of the village.

'Witcher !', shouted a woman, helping a couple of folk leaned against the collapsed stone wall of what before this squall struck, had served as a tavern. 'Here !', she shouted again, as Gerd passed by, and this time, she waved as well.

Gerd, stopped, got off his mare, and with a nod, he approached the raven haired woman. 'What is it ?'.

'Are you blind ?', the woman asked calmly. 'Well, are you ?', she asked once more, as she received no reply from the witcher.

'Not to my knowledge. No...!'

'Then why are you acting as if you were ? Look around you. There's plenty of folk that need a hand- And if you dare ask why, well I'd argue it's your civic duty to do so. Don't you agree ?'.

'Alright.', he replied, stopping near her. 'What am I to do ?'.

'Well, help me stand, for instance...', the woman said, as Gerd proceeded to lift the woman on her feet. 'And...', she added, as Gerd helped her up. 'I'm in dire need of a witcher's services.', she continued with a hiss, as she gently touched the small cut she had on the left side of her forehead.

'That was a while back...', Magnar sighed. 'And if I call to mind right, those had been the longest couple of weeks I've ever lived through. Most spent hungry and poor, until we happened upon that caravan traveling into Kaedwen...!'

'Was it ?', Rocco asked, walking a few steps from the backside of the horse. 'It seemed a short journey...!'

'That's 'cause you were pissed drunk and neck deep in that wench we picked from Lothorn.', Magnar replied from the front. 'Said you'll hermit with her in the mountains. Far from all the

plight of civilization, and live the rest of your lives in peace.'

'Funny. I don't recall any of that...It must've slipped me mind.'

'It slipped your mind alright...', Magnar murmured, leading the horse by the reins, through a narrow path, running amongst two cliffs covered on each side by woodland, whilst from the left side of the path, the roar of a water stream was steadily growing louder.

However, when Galodo regained consciousness, and he did so, with a couple of grunts. His eyes opened to the sight of a horse's right thigh, and thick wooden boards, past which the rapid and loud churn of the course of water was fiercely running below. As he was on the back of a silver bay mare, with his hands and legs tied, while they were passing a rope bridge over the Naa'l.

'He's waking up...', Rocco said.

'About time.', Magnar answered.

'Oy !', Rocco uttered from behind, poking Galodo's shoulder with a long cane. 'Don't try anything funny. Alright ?'.

'Or do...', Magnar added from the front with a snicker. 'But, if we survive the damn fall, and you manage to not drown. If I lay my hands on you, I'll crack you in half alike swine, from your neck all the way to your pecker.', he continued with a short snicker.

'Luckily...', someone added from the saddle, to Galodo's left. 'It'll surely be a far more kinder death than what the Zerrikanians have in store for you.'

'Vitri...', Galodo guessed, while the individual in the saddle chuckled. 'You're joined up with them now ?', he continued, with a grunt as he attempted to move his head.

'So seems to be the will of the world.', the halfling replied, with a sneer. 'What was I to do anyway ? You left us. Here of all places, and fled west. Our dauntless leader...', Vitri mocked. 'For all we had gone through together. The years alone... I wasn't able to believe it then. Nor was I capable of believing my eyes when I saw you laid down and bloody, after Rocco knocked you. It's a bit rich, I know...', he sighed, clicking his tongue. 'As the first thought to myself was, 'He's back ? Did he return for us ?'. But, not even a moment later, Magnar happened to mention you had only done so, in order to pay the Thyrs debt. And at that moment, I knew It had been foolish of me to believe such a thing, don't you think ?', Vitri said, then scoffed. 'I blame it on Raebthan, he's the one that insisted you'd be back. But, I'd be lying. For we all, in our desperate faith expected you'd return. However, neither of us could fuckin' realize, it won't be for us. A band of thieves, and cutthroats.'

'Raebthan...', Galodo murmured.

'He's dead...', the halfling began, with a sniff. 'The Walahians...', he sighed.

'He didn't go nicely.', Rocco added from behind, as they stepped off the bridge, on the other side of the great river.

'That he did not.', Vitri continued. 'I noticed you still have his notebook. Made it your own I see.', the halfling said, as he was browsing through the notebook's pages. 'Been reading through it since we left. And so far, it hasn't been a bad read.'

'You're heading in the wrong way...', Galodo uttered, with a hiss as he raised his head.

Magnar chuckled. 'Are we now?', he asked with a click of his tongue. 'I might not know the place, but I damn well remember passing that very bridge, when we came down from the hills. You know, after that half a day stop we had...'

Galodo, huffed, squirming about with a couple of grunts. 'Mhm...'

'And I can recollect, that you, Zezka and Sartor, were nowhere to be seen. The old dog, Windham, said you three made off soon after we came to a halt. When I asked where, he shrugged, and alike good, old, wise Windham, we made nothing of it. But cut to now...As I know, he knew where you lot went that day.'

Galodo murmured. 'So, you happened to run into good old Windham?'.

'Aye. We crossed paths with the old brigand a few months back, on our way down south. As we passed through a village, half a day on horseback, north of here. By the name of Basara or Baztrra, or something of the sorts...', Magnar replied, then spat and cleared his throat. 'As it turned out... He did fare a good livin' for himself at old age. Hell, the man even found himself a fine wench too. About a dozen years younger than he. Tits still pointing up, supple, blond haired, green eyed wench, with no damned spawn of another pillock. To our surprise he was, considering of how we all parted ways, quite merry to see us. Treated us with food, and a couple good drinks. Yet right in between pissed drunk and half asleep, the old hound said something the woke both me and Rocco from our drunken stupor. Nor I, nor Rocco can say of how he got to it, but he mentioned the very place you three went that day. Apparently, he was lookin' for the spots you three had your stashes hidden at for some time, and admittedly, he got two. As before you attempted your robbery, you and Sartor, promised that he'd be fairly compensated for his work. But, the promised share, did not come. Thus...'

'Where's he then?', Galodo asked, still recovering from the knock Rocco gave him, unsure of whether he had a broken nose or not.

'Ah...', Magnar said scratching the back of his head. 'He died. The damned troll killed him for trying to steal a fuckin' necklace. Pearls, the old man said. Obsessed over the damned thing for days. Until one day, when he finally nicked them. The troll found out someone took 'em. Lined us all against the wall of the cave, and threatened to mash us against it if we wouldn't give it up. To this day, I've yet to make sense of how he knew that the old man took 'em, or if he just simply guessed...Whichever it was, none of us tried to mess with him ever since.'

Galodo softly chuckled. 'What does the troll have to do with all of this?'.

'Not much. Sides the fact that we offered to help him rob the folk passin' through, as payment of his fee. Seemed a suitable place for our camp as well, all the while we scoured the damned place looking for the stash.', Magnar replied, leading the horse. 'You know, life hasn't been all that merry since we've all parted ways. To Rocco's luck, and mine, nor the Thyr's or the

Walahians had seen us. As we always were left aside from proper business, and spent most of our time huntin' or within the camp. Either that, or they knew we knew very little of your comings and goings, and left us be. Huh. And as luck had it, we managed to scatter, right before they raided our camp, following your botched robbery.'

'By the way...', Vitri uttered. 'How did you managed to escape ? 'Cause by what I understood from reading this journal of yours...It took you about three weeks to get on the western side of the Blue Mountains. Who helped you ?'.

'Does it matter ?'.

'It does not...', the halfling replied, browsing through the pages of the mercenaries journal. 'But, since you did so in such few days, you must've had local help.', Vitri continued with a smirk, as he gently touched the back of Galodo's head with the spine of the journal. 'You hired, one of those Free Warriors. Didn't you ?'.

Galodo chuckled.

'I thought so.', Vitri added, cracking the journal open once again, still smiling. 'Though, it must've been a costly expense...'.

'So, are you going to tell me what I'm supposed to help you with ?'. Gerd inquired, as he stood near his newest employer, with a medical kit laid open over his arms, watching the woman tend the wounded.

She gasped. 'Does your kind lack the virtue of patience ?'.

'At times.', he replied, while the woman extended her arm towards him.

'Vial...', she continued, as Gerd placed the required vial in her palm. 'Thank you.'.

The contents of the vial itself, consisted mostly of herbs, alcohest, and was similar to a witcher potion, yet the scent wasn't near as dreadful as Gerd expected. It was sweet, with a subtle scent, of what Gerd supposed to be honeysuckle, while the texture itself was oleaginous. She applied it mostly over bruises and small cuts, or other lesions...

'Well, with regards to your lack of patience. I urge you to gather some. And do so, just because I asked you to...'. she added, while she took out of her satchel, a couple of bandages, that she placed over the medical kit Gerd held, then moved to the other peasant in need of medical attention.

'Should you be moving as much as you do ? Considering...'.

'No, probably not. However, considering, that I am still able, I ought to lend a hand to these people.', she replied, as she then stopped and sighed while clinching her eyes.

'Are you sure you're alright ?'.

'I am...', she began taking a deep breath while finishing up bandaging a girl's arm. 'I just need a few moments.', the woman added, as her skin turned pale shortly after. She then leaned forward, as if nauseous.

'Don't mind me saying, but, you shouldn't have used magic to heal folk. Knowing that it would weaken you like this...'

She softly chuckled. 'You noticed that ?'.

'I did. You're not the first sorceress I've had the pleasure to meet...'

'Hmm...', she murmured setting her eyes onto the witcher. 'I'm not actually a sorceress, at least not yet...'

'Furthermore reason to cease the use of magic-'

'I want to help ! I had to help...', she replied, as she took hold of an amulet that she wore near her chest.

Gerd sighed. 'Nevertheless. It's praiseworthy that you tried, and even succeeded. But you didn't have to. Others alike you wouldn't have even cared. And why would they. Healing a helpless peasant, who might die the next few days of dysentery anyway...And doing that, while knowing that their life would be at stake-'

'So, I should've left them be ? Wounds untended ? Children too ?', she uttered, cutting the witcher short.

'Someone else would've been able to do it.'

'Therefore, if you were to be in a similar situation. A village attacked by ghouls for example. You would let innocent children and folk to perish ?'.

'That's another matter altogether. But, I would've tried to kill the monster, as that is my trade. Though, I would not risk my life, to save a few villagers. The former being much simpler.'

'Why ?! Because you disapprove of altruism ?', she scoffed. 'Or you just loathe that the ealdorman might knight you for your show of chivalry ?, she taunted.

'No. It's that I'd rather prefer to avoid an injury, that would make me wish I was dead instead.'

'I disagree.', she replied with a sniff.

'Right. You might continue to do so, for several years at the least. I used to be just as stubborn, and believe it or not, I disagreed as well. Naively believed in heroic gestures and ethics, chivalry, morals and so on...', Gerd added, with a chuckle. 'Even though I was taught and told not to. The irony is, that, after so many decades spent on the path, I don't anymore. If I were you, I'd just give it time...'

'Well.', she began with a scoff. 'I for one pity you. To think and care so little of folk, and to state so placidly that their lives have no value. And what really vexes me the most, is the boldness alone, with which you presume to know me, and beyond that, of how I'll turn out over the years into a nihilist alike you...', she replied, with a huff, as she then attempted to stand. 'It's no wonder folk ostracize your kind so...!'

'Could be...', Gerd murmured, as he stood up. 'However. Many years ago, I stepped in to help a nobleman and his wife, who previously, through an attaché, nonetheless, hired me to take care of some kikimora pestering his estate, from being killed and robbed, on the road to Beaclair. I stepped in and killed two of the robbers while the rest fled, only to find myself then insulted and spat at, all because, by his words, I dared to stick my prick where it didn't belong. All the while he was holding onto his nostrils to stop his nosebleed, vehemently gesticulating with his other hand as he walked and climbed in the wagon.'

'My point exactly.', she replied, while standing up.

'Meaning ?',

'You're an idiot.'

'I am ? How so ?', Gerd asked with a chuckle.

'Due to your poor excuse.', she began with a sigh. 'Usually, folk, in villages alike this one, don't have the sense of entitlement and pride of a nobleman. Most fear you, others hate for the simple fact that there is no reason not to. And do not mistake their lack of decorum for mere impudence. I doubt they would curse and spit at you for saving their lives alike the noble you've mentioned.'

'Perhaps. Yet, what I meant by it was-'

'I know what you meant...', she interrupted, shifting her gaze towards the eastern hills, at the base of which laid the pond. As after several moments, which Gerd spent by mostly looking around, her condition seemed to take a turn for the better. 'Regarding what you're supposed to help me with...', she resumed.

'Yes, go on...', Gerd murmured, as he turned towards her.

'I require your tracking expertise, in order to locate the whereabouts of my teacher. He and I had been separated during the- incident. However, last I seen of him, was east, near that pond, over yonder.', she continued, pointing towards the hills to the east.

'Alright.', Gerd replied, clearing his throat.

'How much would that be ?', the woman asked, laying her emerald eyes upon the monster slayer.

'It depends, on how far he has gone...!'

'Therefore, all of that translated in coin would be ?'.

'Roughly...', the witcher said, scratching his nose. 'About one hundred crowns.'

'What !?'

'This is no ordinary contract. Even though you try to vaguely describe the incident, and offer as little details as possible. Which, increases the risk I'm taking. It's fairly clear to me, by now, that this was not caused by extreme weather. Yet, whatever it was, it must've been magical in nature. Hence the price...'

She sighed. 'Fine. So be it.'

'Good. We'll talk details on our way over there.', Gerd said, as he stepped off the front porch of the tavern. 'Shall we ?', he continued, as the aspiring sorceress replied with a nod, and followed in his step. As then, both headed east towards the pond.

'What should I begin with ?', she inquired, after a few moments.

'The beginning.', Gerd replied.

'What's the matter now ?', asked Vitri, as Magnar and Rocco sifted through the pages of a notebook. A question which only served to further irritate the skelligan. 'Magnar ?'.

'Fuckin' Windham and his damned notes !', Magnar burst, facing the woods on the side of the road, as he attempted to make sense of a page's contents. Failing to do so, he turned to Rocco, then approached Galodo. 'Listen now, you little cunt. I know we're close to it. Windham, had it's whereabouts around here. So, where ?', Magnar asked, as they came to a halt not long after they stepped off the bridge. 'Which way is it ? Point me towards it.'

'Well...', he began, with a snort. 'I recall offering directions. Directions you so swiftly deemed unworthy. Alas, when I said that you were going the wrong way, I meant it.'

'Fair enough...', Magnar grunted, stopping near the rear of the mare. 'Which way is it then ?', he continued, as he swiftly closed Windham's notebook.

'Had I known you'd be this frustrated about it, I would've made it more obvious-'.

'He did tell you...', Vitri added, with a smirk, to which Magnar scoffed.

'Stop mocking about, you cunt ! And tell me...', Magnar interrupted, taking hold of Galodo's hair. 'Now. Where is it ? Eh ? Where to ?'.

'Shouldn't you know ? Shouldn't your little map and notes tell you ? Well...', he replied, with a roll of his eyes. 'You had me convinced, that you knew its approximate location.', Galodo replied, then continued with a few clicks of his tongue. 'I was so sure you'd find it without my help. After all, the three of you, and Windham, scoured those woods looking for it...'

'Where is it ?!', Magnar asked through his teeth, with a grunt.

'Well, I could tell you. But, you see... I need to take a piss, badly.', Galodo said, while Magnar, with his patience already stretched thin, and a firm scream of his teeth, briskly laid his eyes onto the halfling. 'I would prefer to not do so, on the horse...!'

'Fine.', Vitri promptly spoke. 'Help him down...', he continued, with a nod towards Rocco, who then proceeded to take Galodo off the horse's back. By cutting the ropes around his ankles, and yanking him down by the belt. 'There...!', the halfling said, as Galodo's back smacked the ground.

As then, with a short laugh, he pulled Galodo up, by the rope with which his hands were tied, as he looped another with a knot, which served as a leash. 'Move ! Towards the side of the woods.', Rocco continued, with a thrust of the rope, pulling Galodo in front of him.

'Quite a bunch, you three turned out to be.', Galodo said with a few mutters, as he was heading towards the side of the road.

'You think so ?', Magnar said, as Rocco was following behind.

'Aye.', Galodo said, then spat. 'Had I known it years ago. I would've surely given you three dolts, more assignments together. Sadly, I did not. Certainly, why you three are still here, alive and well...', Galodo replied, approaching a tree. 'Ah. This one seems good enough. What do you think ?'.

'Just take your damn piss, and shut up. Will you ?', Rocco said, stopping a few steps behind Galodo. 'You ran your mouth the whole way here...!'

'On that I agree. You should talk less...', Magnar joined, then drank from a flask he just pulled out from one of the saddle bags. 'But, since we held our end of the deal, how about you do the same. So, tell us which way is it ?', Magnar resumed, as Galodo stopped near the trunk of a tree.

'I thought I was supposed to shut up and tinkle on this tree. Which one is it ?', he responded, with a scoff. 'Can't a man-!'

'Answer the damned question.', Magnar added from the other side of the road.

'Well, not yet, as I've one more request...!'

Amused, Magnar responded with a blank look towards Vitri, and a scornful sneer as he laid his eyes back onto Galodo. 'Fine.', he began, then spat. 'What is it ?'.

'Right...!', Galodo said with a sniff, as he finished relieving himself and turned. 'I'd prefer to walk on my own two feet, from here onward. Rather than being carried on the back of that damn horse alike deer.', he resumed, stepping back onto the road.

'No.', Magnar replied promptly, as he signaled Rocco with a tilt of his head.

'Why not ?', he asked, as Rocco was approaching from the left side and Magnar from the front. 'Vitri, I'm not going to try anything. As said, I just want to walk on my own two feet...', he continued, and as he concluded that words were of little effect, he suddenly yanked on the

rope Rocco held, pulling him forward. Whom, as soon as he reached Galodo attempted a left punch, which the mercenary ducked and swiftly head butted Rocco, who due to the hit, stepped off towards his left, holding his bleeding nose, whilst, Galodo, quickly looped the rope around him then swiped his legs from under him. And right after Rocco hit the ground, Galodo reached for the hilt of the knife Rocco had on the back of his belt. As then, a bolt flew by the mercenary's head, and stopped into the ground behind him.

'If you pull that knife...I'll put the next one through your arm !', Vitri spoke, aiming Galodo's own crossbow at him. 'Let go of that hilt. Now !'.

'What if you miss ?', Galodo asked, pressing his knee into Rocco's back, ready to unsheathe the knife. 'It happened before...'.

'If he's to miss, you reckon you're gonna be able to take me with that knife ?', Magnar said, about five steps from Galodo.

'I'll try...'.

Magnar chuckled. 'I would like to see that.'.

'I wouldn't.', the halfling added. 'But, fine...', he said after a while, then sighed. 'How about I let you stroll along instead of being hauled on the back of the horse. Wasn't that your second request ?', the halfling resumed. 'I'll grant your request, with one simple condition. Just, let go of that knife...'.

'Go on.', Magnar taunted. 'Take that knife out, and see what happens.'.

'I know you are aware what could happen if you choose to do so. For you might be pretty good with a sword in hand. We've all seen you and we all know it. Unfortunately, old friend, the closest one is right here on the saddle.', Vitri said, hitting the sheath of Galodo's sabre with his left foot. 'With a knife, though, not so much.'.

Aware of his poor chances, as alone the probability that Vitri might miss the shot was rather small, but if he would miss, the least favorable prospect followed. Which was, if he could take on Magnar without being injured. Therefore, after a few moments, with a sigh and a click of his tongue, Galodo, loosed his hold onto the hilt of the knife, as he then stepped away from Rocco. Only to be kicked in the gut, by Magnar, who rushed at him.

'You always been a sore loser.', Magnar said, with a snort. 'I liked that 'bout you. Scheming and messin' about, even when the odds were against you. It used to work, your stubbornness. It doesn't anymore...', Magnar continued, standing above Galodo, with his left foot on the mercenary's throat. 'For you've none left around, to stand and have your back. None. All of them either died, left, or you yourself left them to die.', Magnar spoke, taking his foot off Galodo's neck.

'Try and do yourself a favor, old friend...', Vitri uttered, from the saddle. 'As much as you might enjoy it though, quit screwing with us, especially Magnar here, you know how he can get...'.

'So...', Magnar said, as he was half turned towards the halfling.

'Which way ?', Vitri continued, while Galodo, dragged himself near the trunk of a tree, to catch his breath.

'We'll have to track back a bit.', Galodo replied after a few moments, with a sigh.

'How much ?', Magnar asked, turning around. 'Exactly...!'

'Back to the rope bridge.'.

'Where to then ?', Vitri added, then looked at Magnar.

'There's a path. I'll show you, once we get there.'.

'You better...', Magnar mumbled, as Rocco helped Galodo to stand, then pushed him ahead.

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